

the horror at oakdene & Others



Brian Lumley

THE HORROR AT OAKDEENE AND OTHERS

BRIAN LUMLEY

Since the initial appearance of his work in a 1968 issue of *The Arkham Collector*, Brian Lumley has emerged as a singularly talented and versatile writer in the domain of the uncanny. Ensorcelled at an early age by the cosmic world of H. P. Lovecraft, Lumley has developed his own imaginative adaptation of the Cthulhu Mythos in stories which range from the nighted, nethermost regions of subterranean dread to the vast, star-flung spaces beyond the rim of the world.

The title story in Brian Lumley's new Arkham House collection begins within the eerie confines of Oakdeene Sanatorium, where the uncovering of an invocation from the pages of the horrendous *Cthaat Aquadingen* serves relentlessly to lead the reader into the realm of nightmare. "The Statement of Henry Worthy," another nouvelle of the Cthulhu Mythos, opens on the bleak Yorkshire moors and attains the absolute culmination of loathsome fright within a primeval cavern wherein lurks a race of hideous fungoid anomalies.

Also included in this volume is the very extraordinary "Born of the Winds," a short novel revealing Lumley's mastery as one of the supreme storytellers in the genre: here the reader is taken on a trek across the Great White North, lacerated by icy arctic winds and ominous supernatural incursions, and climactically confronted by the Ithaqua legend as elevated by the author into an entity of awesome cosmic malevolence. Other tales of the occult and the macabre in this collection will afford a compelling testimony to the emergence of Brian Lumley from an early acolyte of H. P. Lovecraft into a significant and distinctive contemporary fantaisiste.

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*The Horror at
Oakdeene and Others*

Books by Brian Lumley

THE CALLER OF THE BLACK

THE BURROWERS BENEATH

BENEATH THE MOORS

THE TRANSITION OF TITUS CROW

THE HORROR AT OAKDEENE AND OTHERS

BRIAN LUMLEY



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*For my wife, Gail,
without whom my children
—both flesh-and-blood and literary—
would never have been.*

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*The Horror at
Oakdeene and Others*

The Viking's Stone

"De Marigny!" Titus Crow's voice sounded tense and urgent over the telephone. "De Marigny, tell me — did you ever lend that book of yours, Loftsson's *Saga-Englendingabók*, to Benjamin Sorlson?"

"Why, yes, Titus," I yawningly answered, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, "— but I got it back all right, and Sorlson seems a genuine enough chap. You know him, though, surely?"

"I know him, yes," Crow's growl came back, strangely tinny over the wire. "I know him for a damn good archeologist, a damned argumentative fool . . . and I know him for a friend, of sorts. But that hardly matters now. Henri, I think I might need your help — if only to talk Sorlson out of it."

"Talk Sorlson out of it?" Dully, apathetically, I repeated him. "Titus, isn't it a bit early in the morning for cryptic messages? And what on Earth are you doing up at this hour anyway?" I was well aware of Crow's habit of working late and rising even later.

" 'This hour,' de Marigny, is 9:00 A.M. — and I'm up to check the mail. I've had a letter from Sorlson. He's gone to Skardaborg — and he's found the stone of Ragnar Gory-Axe! "

Gory-Axe? Skardaborg? What in heaven —? My foggy, sleep-sodden mind would not bring the man's words into focus. I had attended a meeting — a rather bawdy meeting toward the end, not at all Crow's sort of thing — of the London Mystery

Writers' Society the previous evening, and I was now suffering the consequences. I briefly explained this to Crow.

"Coffee, de Marigny," he barked. "I'd prescribe three or four mugs at least, and black! Then, if you're interested, bring Loftsson's book with you and meet me at King's Cross for the first afternoon train north. I'll explain it all then."

Well, a summons from Titus Crow is not something to be lightly put aside — the man has been my friend and mentor ever since my father sent me out of America as a youth — and so I got up and dressed, made a hurried breakfast (including, as my friend had suggested, a great pot of black coffee), placed the book Crow had requested in my briefcase, and then caught a taxi for King's Cross.

In the taxi I took out the *Saga Englendingabók* and looked up "Skardaborg." The book was very rare, I knew that, for it was a manuscript copy in longhand from the original Latin — or so its preface led me to believe. Crow, after borrowing the book one summer some four years earlier, had told me he believed it to be a translation of Jon Loftsson's lost Latin work on the Kings of Norway and the adventures of the Vikings in England; he doubted if any other copy remained extant. He had referred to it as "Loftsson's book" ever since. Certainly there *was* a lost Latin work, believed to be circa 1115, but I secretly disputed Crow's authority to claim *my* book as being related to that work.

Skardaborg! Yes, there it was: Scarborough, as I had guessed. So, Benjamin Sorlson, the celebrated if unorthodox archeologist and expert in Viking and other ancient Norwegian matters, was in Scarborough. Now . . . what of Ragnar Gory-Axe?

Before I could further follow my enquiry the taxi arrived at King's Cross. I put the book away, paid the driver, and made

my way to the ticket-booth. There, like a fool, I asked for a return ticket to Skardaborg before realizing my slip; but eventually I found myself on the northbound platform searching for my friend, Titus Crow.

He was impossible to miss. Tall in his dark suit, with his leonine head and imposing looks, he would have seemed prominent in any crowd; but when I stood with him it would be safe to say that few if any of the other people on the platform recognized us as "two of London's foremost occultists."

Now, I oppose such a description as applied in any derogative manner to myself (and as in the past certain members of the press have found occasion so to use it) but I do not deny my interest in occult matters. How could I and own to a father, Etienne-Laurent de Marigny, who was one of the greatest of modern mystics? It is merely that I myself am no great adept, and if I were I should certainly *not* use dark forces to my own ends.

Crow, too, deplores this "Black Magician" tag, for he is one to whom, in his unending search for mysteries and discoveries of marvels, the occult has been simply a passage down which his wanderings have taken him; where he has learned, on more than one occasion, outré things unheard of in the more mundane world of ordinary men. Crow may, in that sense, be called an occultist — but so is he a most knowledgeable man and something of an expert in many fields.

We managed to get a compartment to ourselves on the train, but it was only after the journey commenced that Titus made any attempt to explain his purpose in following Sorlson to Scarborough, and then not without a little prodding on my part:

"Er, you said Sorlson had 'found the stone of Ragnar Gory-Axe' . . . ?"

“So he has,” Crow answered, nodding, “and damn him for a fool, he intends to bring the thing back to London!”

“Just what is this stone, Titus, and why is it so important to you?”

“The stone? Oh, excuse me, de Marigny, but I thought you were on intimate terms with that book of yours. The stone is a Bauta-stein or *menbir* — though you’d usually only use the latter term in Celtic connections — raised near a tomb for the spirit of the occupant to rest upon at night, like a perch, and by means of which the ghost might find its way back to the tomb at daybreak.”

“How very homely,” I answered, with something of a shudder. “Then it’s an important historical and archeological find. Surely Sorlson only wants to present the thing to a museum or some such authority?”

“He wants it for himself,” Crow bleakly told me, “and that’s exactly where the trouble lies. That stone *must not* be interfered with! There’s a curse on the thing, one that goes back eight hundred years to the Viking wars — and it is still operative!

“You see de Marigny,” he went on after a moment’s pause, “unlike us Sorlson sees little to fear in this sort of thing. He laughed at me when I let it slip about the stone and its curse three months ago. In fact he made it clear that he thought I was pulling his leg about the stone’s very existence. . . . Or so I thought! But in truth he must have known something of Ragnar Gory-Axe before; and then, when I told him of your book. . . . Well, no matter how slim the chance, Sorlson obviously thought my story was at least worth looking into.” He stroked his chin. “When did he borrow the book, by the way?”

“Just six weeks ago. He only kept it for a week. Then he made me a fantastic offer for it, which I refused. I remembered how rare you believed it to be.”

“Not rare, unique!” he answered. “Kept it for a week, eh? Yes, that would be ample time to copy the information he needed.”

“Information?”

“Directions from the book,” Crow explained. “Oh, they’re in there, all right! In the prose related to the poems, and —”

“Hang on a minute, Titus,” I rudely cut him off. “I’m afraid you’re moving a bit too fast for me. You mean you’ve actually known of this — *menhir* — for some time?”

“For four years, yes, since I myself borrowed Loftsson’s book from you and tracked the tomb down. Incidentally, did you bring the book with you? Ah, I see you did! Give it to me and I’ll show you what I mean. The initial clues are here in the poems. I’ve always been interested in these battle sagas, and being something of an archeologist — albeit an amateur — well, I couldn’t resist the challenge. I wish I had now. But listen —”
He found his page and commenced to read.

*“In Skardaborg we had no yearn,
To pillage, plunder, sack, and burn;
We’d plow the waves to Whitby where
We knew a war fleet waited there.
But Skardaborg’s men laid a trap,
Our great wavebiters to enwrap
In floating nets till, tangle-oared,
We had to stand and fight the horde.
No quarter asked and none proffered,*

*As shields were lifted, spears prepared,
Till came the furious battle-clash,
And axe and sword were soon awash. . . .*

Crow paused in his reading and looked up: "So commenced the battle," he commented. "Now, de Marigny, the poem goes on in pretty much the same 'thud and blunder' fashion for many a couplet, until King Eystein, ever in the thick of the battle, notices one of his ships to be doing extremely well. With blood in his eyes so that he can't see to his best advantage, Eystein flings yet another spear while enquiring of one of his men:

*" 'The sea-chief, name him, of yon ship,
Aye, him who stands with mail adrip,
In foemen's guts, in berserk glee;
Now tell me, Gudrod, who is he?'*

"He is answered:

*" ' 'Tis Ragnar, son of Hildursleif,
Commands the Seasnake like a chief,
Aye, Ragnar Gory-Axe his name,
And in the stern there, see that Dame?
A witch most learned of Lapland's art,
'Tis Ragnar's mother, legs athwart,
Calling no doubt to Ragnar's side,
The Aesir o'er the bloodied tide.'
'Of wizard or witch-son I've no ken,
But say thee, Gudrod, given ten
Like him who wields yon axe so red,
We'd soon put all these foe to bed!'*

“So you see, Henri, this Ragnar Gory-Axe was only an ‘up-and-comer,’ unnoticed of Eystein until this battle at Scarborough. And yet — if we can believe the book, and of course we’ve proof in the stone that we can — he’d been in many a fray before; and always with his mother, Hildursleif the witch, beside him. The poem goes on to describe Ragnar’s death, Eystein’s wrath, and Hildursleif’s woe. Let’s see, now — yes, here:

*“And then on Seasnake’s bloodied flank,
Tossing his helm down to the plank,
Young Ragnar with a berserk shriek,
Turned on the foe his dragon’s beak.
But as his golden locks flew free,
An arrow speeding o’er the sea,
Brought forth a scream the world to chill,
And gored his brain with iron bill —*

“Of course,” Crow paused again, “you’ll notice that the poems aren’t up to the standard of Skalaglam’s or Thjodolf’s — but I can’t tell if the faults lie in the original work, which I would consider unlikely, or in the translation. The *kenning* is too slight to warrant comment. Anyway, Eystein wins the battle, and the saga goes on like this:

*“With dragons fore and snekkes behind,
King Eystein in his blood-rage blind,
Slid in the bay and took the town,
And burned Skardaborg to the ground.
Gray Hildursleif, calling the Aesir,*

*Made heard her voice through all the ether,
And raised a storm and Thor's bright blade,
To guide her to a forest glade.
In craggy cleft she made his mound,
Where Ragnar's Bauta-stein she found,
And writ in ancient, northern rune,
A curse upon 't before his tomb.
The stone was raised in forest bower,
Where died the Dame in that same hour,
And Seasnake's lads, all sore dismayed,
Beside her son the witch-wife laid. . . .*

“So there you are, de Marigny. . . . Of course I looked for further references in the prose, and eventually I tracked down the tomb in Allerston Forest.”

“The tomb? Gory-Axe's tomb?” I stupidly queried, still feeling the dull weight of the previous night's party.

“Ragnar's tomb, yes,” Crow sighed at my slowness. “And his Bauta-stein, with the runes still on it beneath the moss of centuries. Now Sorlson has found it, too — and it's my fault, I fear!”

Here my interest picked up greatly. “And you say the curse is still active? You think Sorlson's in danger, then?”

“That's it exactly, Henri. He's in desperate trouble if ever he tries to move that stone, or even interfere with it. That part of the forest site is abhorred by locals, has been for hundreds of years. They say the area's haunted — and of course it is — and they won't go near it. The shade of the Viking walks there still, and the runes on the stone make it clear that there's a doom in store for anyone foolish enough to disturb it!”

"And you could read those 'ancient northern runes'?" I asked.

"No, not immediately, but I made a copy and later used Walmsley's *Notes on Deciphering Codes, Cryptograms, and Ancient Inscriptions* to translate the thing. More about that later."

"But didn't Ragnar's, er, shade — didn't his ghost make itself known to you?"

"I copied the runes — that's all. I made no attempt to disturb the stone, none whatever. But I did have a rather peculiar dream, yes!"

"A dream, Titus? What sort of dream?"

"Never mind, de Marigny," he frowned. "It was sufficient, though, to warn me off Ragnar's tomb forever — and that's why I blame myself for having let the thing slip to Sorlson in the first place. Why, at times I swear the man's as avaricious as old Bannister Brown-Farley used to be. Not for money, mind you, or even power or acclaim. He simply likes to *own* things." He passed my book back across to me with a thin smile. "Here, do yourself a favor and read it. I could never appreciate people who own wonderful things simply for the sake of ownership!"

So there it was; I found myself compared with Bannister Brown-Farley, a rather unscrupulous explorer-adventurer type, infamous for his smuggling of stolen foreign antiques into England! And so I sat abashed, immersed in guts and gore, Loftsson's book on my lap, for the rest of the journey. . . .

After changing at York we were in Scarborough by 7:00 P.M., and we took a taxi to the Queen's Hotel where Crow knew Sorlson to be staying. We found him in the bar, well into his fifth or sixth drink, and it was plain that Benjamin Sorlson was not a

particularly happy man. He did not see us approach and started inordinately when Crow took him by the arm.

"Titus Crow!" he exclaimed after a moment's hesitation. "And Henri de Marigny, too. It's good to see you — both of you!"

Sorlson was a small but stocky man, unlike the popular image of his Norwegian ancestors, with gray eyes, sandy hair, and gangling arms. As he welcomed us to the bar and ordered drinks I could see that the hands at the ends of those long arms were visibly trembling. Crow, too, at first sight, had picked up the man's obvious nervousness. My friend became immediately concerned, I could see that, but he hid his worry for the moment in a question:

"The stone, Benjamin — you've really found it?"

"I have," Sorlson answered. "Indeed I have! The directions in Henri's book were, as you yourself told me, quite explicit." He turned to me and grinned, a forced grin I thought, then asked Crow: "Well, what's your next step, Titus? Are you going to shop me to the Royal Archeological Society or something like that? It won't make any difference, you know — 'finder's keepers,' and all that."

"You just don't want to understand, do you Benjamin? Man, you're *already* shopped — and to a far greater power than any Archeological Society, believe me!" Crow's eyes narrowed as they studied the other's face. "But then, perhaps I'm wrong — perhaps you are beginning to understand after all!"

"Eh? What d'you mean, Crow?"

"I mean, Benjamin, that the bar's scarcely open but already you seem well on your way to getting drunk. I don't remember you for a drinking man? Secondly, you should be cock-a-hoop

over your coup here — but the fact is you look more than a trifle worried. Been having any dreams during your stay, by any chance?"

"Dreams?" Sorlson visibly flinched at the word. "Why, yes I have, these last two or three nights — since I found the stone, in fact — but that's hardly surprising, is it? All that rot you fed me about curses and so on. . . ."

"But that was three months ago, Benjamin," Titus quietly reminded him. "And in any case — you've seen the inscriptions for yourself now. What did you make of them?"

"Plenty of time for translations later, Titus; and anyway, what if the stone does carry a — curse?" He tried to make light of it and reached up to clap Crow on the shoulder. "I'll never fail to be amazed how any man as intelligent as you are can believe in such ——"

"I've heard all that before, my friend," Crow harshly cut him off, "but it doesn't alter the fact that this curse is real and extant! Man, I can sense these things, and so can de Marigny here. For God's sake, why don't you just take our word for it? Leave the stone where it is, Benjamin — leave it completely alone!"

Sorlson turned his eyes away. "It's a bit late for that, Titus."

"What's that?" I broke in. "What's that you say, Benjamin?"

"You mean you've . . . already ——?" Crow let the question hang, his voice falling to a whisper on the last word.

"I have, yes — I've had the stone moved!"

"How did you do it?" Crow sounded tired, as if all of his energy had gone out of him in a moment. "I mean, I remember that the stone stood almost eight feet tall, and there was plenty

of it bedded in the ground, too. It must have weighed almost — four tons?”

“Just over three and a half, in fact. I hired three men and an ex-army truck fitted with pulleys and tackle. We dug around the base of the stone and then hoisted it aboard. That was about 5:30 this afternoon. They should be well on their way to London by now.”

Titus Crow's eyes were suddenly bleak, his face drawn and gray as he asked: “And the tomb? Is that why you yourself stayed back here in Scarborough?” He waited on Sorlson's answer.

“No, no — I found the cleft in the cliff, of course,” Sorlson eventually answered, “but ——”

“But something *stopped* you; is that it, Benjamin?”

“The truth is . . . yes, Crow. And you're right about those dreams I've been having. They've . . . they've worried me. It's not natural for me to dream — not that sort of dream, at any rate. . . .”

Sorlson paused, tossed back his drink and turned from the bar. “I'm simply not willing to take any more chances, that's all. The stuff in the cleft can wait — Gory-Axe's bones, his armor and weapons.” Yet even as he spoke a greedy light glittered in the archeologist's eyes.

“Benjamin,” Crow quietly said, “I've only just realized. For a long time now I've called you friend — but it wasn't the man I admired, only the mind. Now I'm not even sure about that. Why, you're nothing but a thief, a ghoul, a looter of tombs. I just ——”

“No, Titus, you're wrong about me,” Sorlson broke in.

"And if it means that much to you, why — I'll put the stone back again. They can always build a museum round it, I suppose!"

"Do you mean it, Benjamin?" I asked.

"Yes — yes, I do, Henri. But it's not truly out of 'the-goodness-of-my-heart,' as it were. Don't get me wrong — I'd have the stone and everything that goes with it, if I dared. But there's been something wrong, out of tune, ever since I found the stone in the forest." He turned back to Crow: "What train are you catching tonight?"

"Train?" Crow was taken by surprise. "Tonight?"

"Yes, certainly. The sooner we get back down to London, the sooner Gory-Axe gets his stone back. Those men with the truck are staying in London overnight. I'm paying them tomorrow when they deliver it to my place. You know, I rather fancied it in my conservatory, along with ——" He paused and shuddered. "But not now."

While Sorlson was collecting his notebooks, case, and overcoat, I waited in the bar with Titus Crow.

"De Marigny," my friend said after a while, "I hope we're in time. I mean, the inscription on that stone mentions nothing of a stay of execution for good intention!"

We spoke no more and soon Sorlson returned. . . .

We were down country almost as far as Peterborough when I was snatched rudely from my nap. Crow, too, nodding quietly in his corner seat, jerked fearfully awake as Sorlson's terror-fraught shriek filled the dimly lighted compartment.

“Wh. . . What in the name of . . . ?” I began.

Sorlson was sitting bolt upright facing Crow, his eyes wide open and full of horror.

“What is it, Benjamin?” Crow shook himself awake and leaned across to take the archeologist’s shoulder.

“Another dream, Titus — a hellish nightmare!” Sorlson gasped. “Worse than the others. Far worse! It was Ragnar again, but this time he wasn’t merely threatening; he was — *after me!* With his great axe smeared in blood. A . . . a Viking, his head a skull, his eye-sockets full of balefire!”

“Do you feel it, de Marigny?” Crow turned abruptly to me, his face strained and chalky gray, his voice hushed. Until then I had “felt” nothing, but even as Crow spoke an odd sensation began to creep into my bones. A coldness, the chill of ocean spray driven on the north wind.

“I warned you, Sorlson ——” Crow’s voice was now oddly remote, almost faint. “And by God, *I was right to do so!*”

The sway and rock of the train and the clatter of its wheels had lessened now, seemed muffled, and a great wall of mist had built up outside to press in on the speeding carriages; particularly on the left, that side of the train facing the fens, The Wash, and the North Sea beyond.

Sorlson was muttering — more to himself than to anyone else — his eyes wide, staring wildly about the compartment and at the swirling grayness beyond the windows: “It’s a trick! Some sort of joke! You’re trying to frighten me, Crow — that’s it, isn’t it?” There was desperation in his strangely muted voice.

“No trick, Benjamin,” Titus answered. “God! — but I wish it were!”

Sorlson was on his feet now, peering in dreadful premonition out into the mist. I leaned across and gripped Crow's elbow: "Titus! What in hell's happening?" My voice sounded as if it came from far away.

"I . . . I don't know, de Marigny — I've known nothing like this before." As Crow answered, I saw Sorlson stiffen where he stood at the window, and I looked up at the side of the man's face. He was opening and closing his mouth soundlessly like a fish, gesticulating weakly at something out beyond the shut window.

"Titus!" I cried, moving over beside Sorlson to press my face to the glass. "Look!" Frankly, I needed Crow's corroboration of the thing; I could not believe my own eyes!

For outside, riding the mist in ghostly majesty, a great Viking dragonship lay parallel with our compartment, its sides adorned with moisture-dripping shields. And behind those shields, spears raised in hideous salutation, ranks of armored skeletons gave their chief the kill!

Their chief?

In the prow, at the neck of the great, rearing dragon's head, a mist-wreathed figure stood tall and proud . . . but naked of flesh as its demon companions! The *Thing* turned its head in horrid and deliberate disdain, and sparse blond locks blew in a ghost-wind about the fleshless skull. Above grinning jaws, red lights burned in black-walled eye-sockets like coals in the bellow's blast; and those eye-sockets were turned with grim intent directly upon the fear-twisted features of Benjamin Sorlson! Then the *Thing* drew back its ivory arm, and a shining axe gleamed wetly in bony claw.

All normal motion of the train seemed to have stopped by then, to be replaced by the slow heave and swell of an ethereal sea, and even with the windows firmly shut I could clearly hear the slap of waves and the creaking of the dragonship's rigging.

Dimly, as if from eight hundred years back in the abysses of time, I heard Crow's voice shouting instructions: "Down, de Marigny — for your soul's sake *get down!*" He was already on the floor, his hands clawing at the legs of Sorlson who stood spreadeagled against the compartment door and its window. "Leave the window alone, Sorlson —" he shouted from a million miles away. "*Leave it alone!*"

Even as I threw myself down I saw Ragnar's skeletal arm sweep forward in a powerful arc — saw him release the great axe from his graveyard fist — and as I hit the floor beside Crow I heard the window slam down and open, and Sorlson's death-scream as he hurtled backwards over our huddled forms! The stocky body of the archeologist crashed into the opposite door of the compartment and slid in a crumpled heap between the seats. One glance in his direction told me all I needed to know; the haft of a Viking axe stuck out from the left side of his chest. And yet, as I gazed hypnotized at that terrible weapon, slowly the steel melted into mist and vanished . . . *and the breast of Sorlson's suit was clean and unmarked!*

In the next second I realized that the normal train sounds and motions had returned, that the slap of waves and the keening of the wind had faded to the dark oblivion of their origin. Moisture-laden fog was pouring into the compartment through the open window, but Crow was already on his feet attending to that. The dragonship, too, was gone — back to whichever hell spawned the thing, or perhaps Valhalla, who can say?

“We’re lucky,” Crow panted, strength and sanity surging back into his voice and manner. “Myself in particular. But then, I did Ragnar’s stone no harm — neither his stone nor his tomb.”

“And Sorlson?” I questioned, knowing the answer before it came.

“Oh, yes,” Crow answered with a nod, bending over the crumpled body. “He’s dead. Heart attack — or at least, that’s what they’ll call it!”

And of course Crow was right.

Two mornings later, at Crow’s invitation, I went round to Blowne House, his sprawling bungalow home on the outskirts of the city. When I arrived he had just done with sticking a newspaper clipping in one of his many, voluminous files of weird and unnatural events. I had, however, already taken note of the incident in question; it had been given space in most of the previous day’s newspapers:

THREE DIE IN MYSTERY CRASH ON M1

At 9:15 last night, northbound travelers on the M1 at Hemel Hempstead were brought to a halt when a crashed ex-army truck blocked all three lanes with blazing debris. Apparently the vehicle had been traveling south at the time of the as yet unexplained accident, but somehow ended up on the northbound lanes! After the fire had been put out local police were baffled by the extent of damage to the truck. No other vehicle seemed to have been involved, and yet the

burned out shell of the truck showed a severely sliced superstructure and chassis. One of the policemen at the scene remarked that "it looked as though something had tried to cut the truck in half!" Three bodies — identification not yet complete — were found in the wreckage. Police investigations are continuing. . . .

Of Ragnar's stone there was no mention; but on that subject there was something I had yet to ask Crow. This is how he answered me:

"The inscription, Henri? Why, yes — I copied down the original runes and translated them later. I even put the thing to rhyme, as I believe it was inscribed, but of course my *kenning* isn't much to mention:

*"Here lies the Axe, of witch-wife's blood,
Whose blade was sharp, whose aim was good,
Who washed himself in crimson flood,
Each time the war was waged;*

*Would-be defilers of this tomb,
Let Seasnake's shadow darkly loom,
And Ragnar's spirit seal thy doom —
His curse-lust to assuage!"*

Crow also mentioned his intention of returning to Allerston Forest one day — to see if he was correct in his belief that Ragnar had sailed his marker home again. I, for one, shall not be going with him. . . .

Aunt Hester

I suppose my Aunt Hester Lang might best be described as the "black sheep" of the family. Certainly no one ever spoke to her, or of her — none of the elders of the family, that is — and if my own little friendship with my aunt had been known I am sure that would have been stamped on too; but of course that friendship was many years ago.

I remember it well: how I used to sneak round to Aunt Hester's house in hoary Castle-Iden, not far from Harden on the coast, after school when my folks thought I was at Scouts, and Aunt Hester would make me cups of cocoa and we would talk about newts ("efts," she called them), frogs, conkers, and other things — things of interest to small boys — until the local Scouts' meeting was due to end, and then I would hurry home.

We (father, mother, and myself) left Harden when I was just twelve years old, moving down to London where the Old Man had got himself a good job. I was twenty years old before I got to see my aunt again. In the intervening years I had not sent her so much as a postcard (I've never been much of a letter-writer) and I knew that during the same period of time my parents had neither written nor heard from her; but still that did not stop my mother warning me before I set out for Harden not to "drop in" on Aunt Hester Lang.

No doubt about it, they were frightened of her, my parents — well, if not frightened, certainly they were apprehensive.

Now to me a warning has always been something of a challenge. I had arranged to stay with a friend for a week, a school pal from the good old days, but long before the north-bound train stopped at Harden my mind was made up to spend at least a fraction of my time at my aunt's place. Why shouldn't I? Hadn't we always got on famously? Whatever it was she had done to my parents in the past, I could see no good reason why *I* should shun her.

She would be getting on in years a bit now. How old, I wondered? Older than my mother, her sister, by a couple of years — the same age (obviously) as her twin brother, George, in Australia — but of course I was also ignorant of his age. In the end, making what calculations I could, I worked it out that Aunt Hester and her distant brother must have seen at least one hundred and eight summers between them. Yes, my aunt must be about fifty-four years old. It was about time someone took an interest in her.

It was a bright Friday night, the first after my arrival in Harden, when the ideal opportunity presented itself for visiting Aunt Hester. My school friend, Albert, had a date — one he did not really want to put off — and though he had tried his best during the day it had early been apparent that his luck was out regards finding, on short notice, a second girl for me. It had been left too late. But in any case, I'm not much on blind dates — and most dates are "blind" unless you really know the girl — and I go even less on doubles; the truth of the matter was that I had wanted the night for my own purposes. And so, when the time came for Albert to set out to meet his girl, I walked off in the opposite direction, across the autumn fences and fields to ancient Castle-Iden.

I arrived at the little old village at about eight, just as dusk was making its hesitant decision whether or not to allow night's onset, and went straight to Aunt Hester's thatch-roofed bungalow. The place stood (just as I remembered it) at the Blackhill end of cobbled Main Street, in a neat garden framed by cherry trees with the fruit heavy in their branches. As I approached the gate the door opened and out of the house wandered the oddest quartet of strangers I could ever have wished to see.

There was a humped-up, frenetically mobile and babbling old chap, ninety if he was a day; a frumpish fat woman with many quivering chins; a skeletally thin, incredibly tall, ridiculously wrapped-up man in scarf, pencil-slim overcoat, and fur gloves; and finally, a perfectly delicate old lady with a walking-stick and ear-trumpet. They were shepherded by my Aunt Hester, no different it seemed than when I had last seen her, to the gate and out into the street. There followed a piped and grunted hubbub of thanks and general genialities before the four were gone — in the direction of the leaning village pub — leaving my aunt at the gate finally to spot me where I stood in the shadow of one of her cherry trees. She knew me almost at once, despite the interval of nearly a decade.

“Peter?”

“Hello, Aunt Hester.”

“Why, Peter Norton! My favorite young man — and tall as a tree! Come in, come in!”

“It's bad of me to drop in on you like this,” I answered, taking the arm she offered, “all unannounced and after so long away, but I —”

“No excuses required,” she waved an airy hand before us

and smiled up at me, laughter lines showing at the corners of her eyes and in her unpretty face. "And you came at just the right time — my group has just left me all alone."

"Your 'group'?"

"My séance group! I've had it for a long time now, many a year. Didn't you know I was a bit on the psychic side? No, I suppose not; your parents wouldn't have told you about *that*, now would they? That's what started it all originally — the trouble in the family, I mean." We went on into the house.

"Now I had meant to ask you about that," I told her. "You mean my parents don't like you messing about with spiritualism? I can see that they wouldn't, of course — not at all the Old Man's cup of tea — but still, I don't really see what it could have to do with them."

"Not *your* parents, Love," (she had always called me "Love"), "mine — and yours later; but especially George, your uncle in Australia. And not just spiritualism, though that has since become part of it. Did you know that my brother left home and settled in Australia because of me?" A distant look came into her eyes. "No, of course you didn't, and I don't suppose anyone else would ever have become aware of my power if George hadn't walked me through a window. . . ."

"Eh?" I said, believing my hearing to be out of order. "Power? Walked you through a window?"

"Yes," she answered, nodding her head, "he walked me through a window! Listen, I'll tell you the story from the beginning."

By that time we had settled ourselves down in front of the fire in Aunt Hester's living-room and I was able to scan, as she talked, the paraphernalia her "group" had left behind. There

were old leather-bound tomes and treatises, tarot cards, a ouija board shiny brown with age, oh, and several other items beloved of the spiritualist. I was fascinated, as ever I had been as a boy, by the many obscure curiosities in Aunt Hester's cottage.

"The first I knew of the link between George and myself," she began, breaking in on my thoughts, "as apart from the obvious link that exists between all twins, was when we were twelve years old. Your grandparents had taken us, along with your mother, down to the beach at Seaton Carew. It was July and marvelously hot. Well, to cut a long story short, your mother got into trouble in the water.

"She was quite a long way out and the only one anything like close to her was George — who couldn't swim! He'd waded out up to his neck, but he didn't dare go any deeper. Now, you can wade a long way out at Seaton. The bottom shelves off very slowly. George was at least fifty yards out when we heard him yelling that Sis was in trouble. . . .

"At first I panicked and started to run out through the shallow water, shouting to George that he should swim to Sis, which of course he couldn't — *but he did!* Or at least, *I did!* Somehow I'd swapped places with him, do you see? Not physically but mentally. I'd left him behind me in the shallow water, in my body, and I was swimming for all I was worth for Sis in his! I got her back to the shallows with very little trouble — she was only a few inches out of her depth — and then, as soon as the danger was past, I found my consciousness floating back into my own body.

"Well, everyone made a big fuss of George; he was the hero of the day, you see? How had he done it? — they all wanted to know; and all he was able to say was that he'd just seemed to

stand there watching himself save Sis. And of course he *had* stood there watching it all — through my eyes!

“I didn’t try to explain it; no one would have believed or listened to me anyway, and I didn’t really understand it myself — but George was always a bit wary of me from then on. He said nothing, mind you, but I think that even as early as that first time he had an idea. . . .”

Suddenly she looked at me closely, frowning. “You’re not finding all this a bit too hard to swallow, Love?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Not really. I remember reading somewhere of a similar thing between twins — a sort of Corsican Brothers situation.”

“Oh, but I’ve heard of many such!” she quickly answered. “I don’t suppose you’ve read Joachim Feery on the *Necronomicon*?”

“No,” I answered. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, Feery was the illegitimate son of Baron Kant, the German ‘witch-hunter.’ He died quite mysteriously in 1934 while still a comparatively young man. He wrote a number of occult limited editions — mostly published at his own expense — the vast majority of which religious and other authorities bought up and destroyed as fast as they appeared. Unquestionably — though it has never been discovered where he saw or read them — Feery’s source books were very rare and sinister volumes; among them the *Cthaat Aquadingen*, the *Necronomicon*, von Junzt’s *Unspeakable Cults*, Prinn’s *De Vermis Mysteriis*, and others of that sort. Often Feery’s knowledge in respect of such books has seemed almost beyond belief. His quotes, while apparently genuine and authoritative, often differ substantially when compared with the works from which they were sup-

posedly culled. Regarding such discrepancies, Feery claimed that most of his occult knowledge came to him 'in dreams'!" She paused, then asked: "Am I boring you?"

"Not a bit of it," I answered. "I'm fascinated."

"Well, anyhow," she continued, "as I've said, Feery must somewhere have seen one of the very rare copies of Abdul Alhazred's *Necronomicon*, in one translation or another, for he published a slim volume of notes concerning that book's contents. I don't own a copy myself but I've read one belonging to a friend of mine, an old member of my group. Alhazred, while being reckoned by many to have been a madman, was without doubt the world's foremost authority on black magic and the horrors of alien dimensions, and he was vastly interested in every facet of freakish phenomena, physical and metaphysical."

She stood up, went to her bookshelf and opened a large modern volume of Aubrey Beardsley's fascinating drawings, taking out a number of loose white sheets bearing lines of her own neat handwriting.

"I've copied some of Feery's quotes, supposedly from Alhazred. Listen to this one:

"'Tis a veritable & attestable Fact, that between certain related Persons there exists a Bond more powerful than the strongest Ties of Flesh & Family, whereby one such Person may be *aware* of all the Trials & Pleasures of the other, yea, even to experiencing the Pains or Passions of one far distant; & further, there are those whose skills in such Matters are aided by forbidden Knowledge or Intercourse through dark Magic with Spirits & Beings of outside Spheres. Of the latter: I have sought them out, both Men & Women, & upon Examination have in all Cases discovered them to be Users of Divination, Observers of Times, Enchanters, Witches,

Charmers, or Necromancers. All claimed to work their Wonders through Intercourse with dead & departed Spirits, but I fear that often such Spirits were evil Angels, the Messengers of the Dark One & yet more ancient Evils. Indeed, among them were some whose Powers were prodigious, who might at will *inhabit* the Body of another even at a great Distance & against the Will & often unbeknown to the Sufferer of such Outrage. . . .”

She put down the papers, sat back and looked at me quizzically.

“That’s all very interesting,” I said after a moment, “but hardly applicable to yourself.”

“Oh, but it is, Love,” she protested. “I’m George’s twin, for one thing, and for another ——”

“But you’re no witch or necromancer!”

“No, I wouldn’t say so — but I am a ‘User of Divinations,’ and I do ‘work my Wonders through Intercourse with dead & departed Spirits.’ That’s what spiritualism is all about.”

“You mean you actually take this, er, Alhazred and spiritualism and all seriously?” I deprecated.

She frowned. “No, not Alhazred, not really,” she answered after a moment’s thought. “But he is interesting, as you said. As for spiritualism: yes, I *do* take it seriously. Why, you’d be amazed at some of the vibrations I’ve been getting these last three weeks or so. *Very* disturbing, but so far rather incoherent; frantic, in fact. I’ll track him down eventually, though — the spirit, I mean. . . .”

We sat quietly then, contemplatively for a minute or two. Frankly, I didn’t quite know what to say; but then she went on: “Anyway, we were talking about George and how I believed that even after that first occasion he had a bit of an idea that I

was at the root of the thing. Yes, I really think he did. He said nothing, and yet. . . .

“And that’s not all, either. It was some time after that day on the beach before Sis could be convinced that she hadn’t been saved by me. She was sure it had been me, not George, who pulled her out of the deep water.

“Well, a year or two went by, and school-leaving exams came up. I was all right, a reasonable scholar — I had always been a bookish kid — but poor old George. . . .” She shook her head sadly. My uncle, it appeared, had not been too bright.

After a moment she continued. “Dates were set for the exams and two sets of papers were prepared, one for the boys, another for the girls. I had no trouble with my paper, I knew even before the results were announced that I was through easily — but before that came George’s turn. He’d been worrying and chewing, cramming for all he was worth, biting his nails down to the elbows . . . and getting nowhere. I was in bed with flu when the day of his exams came round, and I remember how I just lay there fretting over him. He was my brother, after all.

“I must have been thinking of him just a bit too hard, though, for before I knew it there I was, staring down hard at an exam paper, sitting in a class full of boys in the old school!

“ . . . An hour later I had the papers all finished, and then I concentrated myself back home again. This time it was a definite effort for me to find my way back to my own body.

“The house was in an uproar. I was downstairs in my dressing-gown; mother had an arm round me and was trying to console me; father was yelling and waving his arms about like a lunatic. ‘The girl’s gone *mad!*’ I remember him exploding, red faced and a bit frightened.

“Apparently I had rushed downstairs about an hour earlier. I had been shouting and screaming tearfully that I’d miss the exam, and I had wanted to know what I was doing home. And when they had called me *Hester* instead of *George* ——! Well, then I had seemed to go completely out of my mind!

“Of course, I had been feverish with flu for a couple of days. That was obviously the answer: I had suddenly reached the height of a hitherto unrecognized delirious fever, and now the fever had broken I was going to be all right. That was what they said. . . .

“George eventually came home with his eyes all wide and staring, frightened-looking, and he stayed that way for a couple of days. He avoided me like the plague! But the next week — when it came out about how good his marks were, how easily he had passed his examination papers — well. . . .”

“But surely he must have known,” I broke in. What few doubts I had entertained were now gone forever. She was plainly not making all of this up.

“But why should he have known, Love? He knew he’d had two pretty nightmarish experiences, sure enough, and that somehow they had been connected with me; but he couldn’t possibly know that they had their origin *in* me — that I formed their focus.”

“He did find out, though?”

“Oh, yes, he did,” she slowly answered, her eyes seeming to glisten just a little in the homely evening glow of the room. “And as I’ve said, that’s why he left home in the end. It happened like this:

“I had never been a pretty girl — no, don’t say anything, Love. You weren’t even a twinkle in your father’s eye then, he

was only a boy himself, and so you wouldn't know. But at a time of life when most girls only have to pout to set the boys on fire, well, I was only very plain — and I'm probably giving myself the benefit of the doubt at that.

“Anyway, when George was out nights — walking his latest girl, dancing, or whatever — I was always at home on my own with my books. Quite simply, I came to be terribly jealous of my brother. Of course, you don't know him, he had already been gone something like fifteen years when you were born, but George was a handsome lad. Not strong, mind you, but long and lean and a natural for the girls.

“Eventually he found himself a special girlfriend and came to spend all his time with her. I remember being furious because he wouldn't tell me anything about her. . . .”

She paused and looked at me and after a while I said: “Uh-huh?” inviting her to go on.

“It was one Saturday night in the spring, I remember, not long after our nineteenth birthday, and George had spent the better part of an hour dandying himself up for this unknown girl. That night he seemed to take a sort of stupid, well, *delight* in spiting me; he refused to answer my questions about his girl or even mention her name. Finally, after he had set his tie straight and slicked his hair down for what seemed like the thousandth time, he dared to wink at me — maliciously, I thought, in my jealousy — as he went out into the night.

“That did it. Something *snapped!* I stamped my foot and rushed upstairs to my room for a good cry. And in the middle of crying I had my idea —”

“You decided to, er, swap identities with your brother, to have a look at his girl for yourself,” I broke in. “Am I right?”

She nodded in answer, staring at the fire; ashamed of herself, I thought, after all this time. "Yes, I did," she said. "For the first time I used my power for my own ends. And mean and despicable ends they were.

"But this time it wasn't like before. There was no instantaneous, involuntary flowing of my psyche, as it were. No immediate change of personality. I had to force it, to concentrate and concentrate and *push* myself. But in a short period of time, before I even knew it, well, there I was."

"There you were? In Uncle George's body?"

"Yes, in his body, looking out through his eyes, holding in his hand the cool, slender hand of a very pretty girl. I had expected the girl, of course, and yet. . . .

"Confused and blustering, letting go of her hand, I jumped back and bumped into a man standing behind me. The girl was saying: 'George, what's wrong?' in a whisper, and people were staring. We were in a second-show picture-house queue. Finally I managed to mumble an answer, in a horribly hoarse, unfamiliar, frightened voice — George's voice, obviously, and my fear — and then the girl moved closer and kissed me gently on the cheek!

"She did! But of course she would, wouldn't she, if I were George? 'Why, you jumped then like you'd been stung —' she started to say; but I wasn't listening, Peter, for I had jumped again, even more violently, shrinking away from her in a kind of horror. I must have gone crimson, standing there in that queue, with all those unfamiliar people looking at me — *and I had just been kissed by a girl!*

"You see, I wasn't thinking like George at all! I just wished

with all my heart that I hadn't interfered, and before I knew it I had George's body in motion and was running down the road, the picture-house queue behind me and the voice of this sweet little girl echoing after me in pained and astonished disbelief.

"Altogether my spiteful adventure had taken only a few minutes, and, when at last I was able to do so, I controlled myself — or rather, George's self — and hid in a shop doorway. It took another minute or two before I was composed sufficiently to manage a, well, a 'return trip,' but at last I made it and there I was back in my room.

"I had been gone no more than seven or eight minutes all told, but I wasn't back to *exactly* where I started out from. Oh, George hadn't gone rushing downstairs again in a hysterical fit, like that time when I sat his exam for him — though of course the period of *transition* had been a much longer one on that occasion — but he had at least moved off the bed. I found myself standing beside the window. . . ." She paused.

"And afterwards?" I prompted her, fascinated.

"Afterwards?" she echoed me, considering it. "Well, George was very quiet about it. . . . No, that's not quite true. It's not that he was quiet, rather that he avoided me more than ever, to such an extent that I hardly ever saw him — no more than a glimpse at a time as he came and went. Mother and father didn't notice George's increased coolness towards me, but I certainly did. I'm pretty sure it was then that he had finally recognized the source of this thing that came at odd times like some short-lived insanity to plague him. Yes, and looking back, I can see how I might easily have driven George completely insane! But of course, from that time on he was forewarned. . . ."

“Forewarned?” I repeated her. “And the next time he —”

“The next time?” She turned her face so that I could see the fine scars on her otherwise smooth left cheek. I had always wondered about those scars. “I don’t remember a great deal about the next time — shock, I suppose, a ‘mental block,’ you might call it — but anyway, the next time was the *last* time! . . .

“There was a boy who took me out once or twice, and I remember that when he stopped calling for me it was because of something George had said to him. Six months had gone by since my shameful and abortive experiment, and now I deliberately put it out of my mind as I determined to teach George a lesson. You must understand, Love, that this boy I mentioned, well . . . he meant a great deal to me.

“Anyway, I was out to get my own back. I didn’t know how George had managed to make it up with his girl, but he had. I was going to put an end to their little romance once and for all.

“It was a fairly warm, early October, I remember, when my chance eventually came. A Sunday afternoon, and George was out walking with his girl. I had it planned minutely. I knew exactly what I must say, how I must act, what I must do. I could do it in two minutes flat, and be back in my own body before George knew what was going on. For the first time my intentions were *deliberately* malicious. . . .”

I waited for my aunt to continue, and after a while again prompted her: “And? Was this when ——”

“Yes, this was when he walked me through the window. Well, he didn’t exactly walk me through it — I believe I leapt; or rather, he leapt me, if you see what I mean. One minute I was sitting on a grassy bank with the same sweet little girl, and the

next there was this awful pain — my whole body hurt, and it was *my* body, for my consciousness was suddenly back where it belonged. Instantaneously, inadvertently, I was — myself!

“*But I was lying crumpled on the lawn in front of the house!* I remember seeing splinters of broken glass and bits of yellow-painted wood from my shattered bedroom window, and then I went into a faint with the pain.

“George came to see me in the hospital — once. He sneered when my parents had their backs turned. He leaned over my bed and said: ‘*Got* you, Hester!’ Just that, nothing more.

“I had a broken leg and collarbone. It was three weeks before they let me go home. By then George had joined the Merchant Navy and my parents knew that somehow I was to blame. They were never the same to me from that time on. George had been the Apple of the Family Eye, if you know what I mean. They knew that his going away, in some unknown way, had been my fault. I did have a letter from George — well, a note. It simply warned me ‘never to do it again,’ that there were worse things than falling through windows!”

“And you never did, er, do it again?”

“No, I didn’t dare; I haven’t dared since. There *are* worse things, Love, than being walked through a window! And if George hates me still as much as he might. . . .

“But I’ve often *wanted* to do it again. George has two children, you know?”

I nodded an affirmation: “Yes, I’ve heard mother mention them. Joe and Doreen?”

“That’s right,” she nodded. “They’re hardly children any more, but I think of them that way. They’ll be in their twenties

now, your cousins. George's wife wrote to me once many years ago. I've no idea how she got my address. She did it behind George's back, I imagine. Said how sorry she was that there was 'trouble in the family.' She sent me photographs of the kids. They were beautiful. For all I know there may have been other children later — even grandchildren."

"I don't think so," I told her. "I think I would have known. They're still pretty reserved, my folks, but I would have learned that much, I'm sure. But tell me: how is it that you and mother aren't closer? I mean, she never talks about you, my mother, and yet you are her sister."

"Your mother is two years younger than George and me," my aunt informed me. "She went to live with her grandparents down South when she was thirteen. Sis, you see, was the brilliant one. George was a bit dim; I was clever enough; but Sis, she was really clever. Our parents sent Sis off to live with Gran-ny, where she could attend a school worthy of her intelligence. She stayed with Gran from then on. We simply drifted apart. . . ."

"Mind you, we'd never been what you might call close, not for sisters. Anyhow, we didn't come together again until she married and came back up here to live, by which time George must have written to her and told her one or two things. I don't know what or how much he told her, but — well, she never bothered with me — and anyway I was working by then and had a flat of my own.

"Years passed, I hardly ever saw Sis, her little boy came along — you, Love — I fell in with a spiritualist group, making real friends for the first time in my life; and, well, that was that.

My interest in spiritualism, various other ways of mine that didn't quite fit the accepted pattern, the unspoken *thing* I had done to George . . . we drifted apart. You understand?"

I nodded. I felt sorry for her, but of course I could not say so. Instead I laughed awkwardly and shrugged my shoulders. "Who needs people?"

She looked shocked. "We all do, Love!" Then for a while she was quiet, staring into the fire.

"I'll make a brew of tea," she suddenly said, then looked at me and smiled in a fashion I well remembered. "Or should we have cocoa?"

"Cocoa!" I instinctively laughed, relieved at the change of subject.

She went into the kitchen and I lit a cigarette. Idle, for the moment, I looked about me, taking up the loose sheets of paper that Aunt Hester had left on her occasional table. I saw at once that many of her jottings were concerned with extracts from exotic books. I passed over the piece she had read out to me and glanced at another sheet. Immediately my interest was caught; the three passages were all from the Holy Bible:

'Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them.' Lev. 19:31.

'Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her and enquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at En-dor.' 1 Sam. 28:6,7.

'Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men.' Acts 19:19.

The third sheet contained a quote from *Today's Christian*:

'To dabble in matters such as these is to reach within demoniac circles, and it is by no means rare to discover scorn and scepticism transformed to hysterical possession in persons whose curiosity has led them merely to attend so-called "spiritual séances." These things of which I speak are of a nature as serious as any in the world today, and I am only one among many to utter a solemn warning against any intercourse with "spirit forces" or the like, whereby the unutterable evil of demonic possession could well be the horrific outcome.'

Finally, before she returned with a steaming jug of cocoa and two mugs, I read another of Aunt Hester's extracts, this one again from Feery's *Notes on the Necronomicon*:

'Yea, & I discovered how one might, be he an Adept & his familiar Spirits powerful enough, control the Wanderings or Migration of his Essence into all manner of Beings & Persons — even from beyond the Grave of Sod or the Door of the Stone Sepulcher. . . .'

I was still pondering this last extract an hour later, as I walked Harden's night streets towards my lodgings at the home of my friend.

Three evenings later, when by arrangement I returned to my aunt's cottage in old Castle-Ilden, she was nervously waiting for me at the gate and whisked me breathlessly inside. She sat me down, seated herself opposite and clasped her hands in her lap almost in the attitude of an excited young girl.

“Peter, Love, I’ve had an idea — such a simple idea that it amazes me I never thought of it before.”

“An idea? How do you mean, Aunt Hester — what sort of idea? Does it involve me?”

“Yes, I’d rather it were you than any other. After all, you know the story now. . . .”

I frowned as an oddly foreboding shadow darkened latent areas of my consciousness. Her words had been innocuous enough as of yet, and there seemed no reason why I should suddenly feel so — *uncomfortable*, but —

“The story?” I finally repeated her. “You mean this idea of yours concerns — Uncle George?”

“Yes, I do!” she answered. “Oh, Love, I can *see* them; if only for a brief moment or two, I can see my nephew and niece. You’ll help me? I know you will.”

The shadow thickened darkly, growing in me, spreading from hidden to more truly conscious regions of my mind. “Help you? You mean you intend to —” I paused, then started to speak again as I saw for sure what she was getting at and realized that she meant it: “But haven’t you said that this stuff was too dangerous? The last time you —”

“Oh, yes, I know,” she impatiently argued, cutting me off. “But now, well, it’s different. I won’t stay more than a moment or two — just long enough to see the children — and then I’ll get straight back . . . *here*. And there’ll be precautions. It can’t fail, you’ll see.”

“Precautions?” Despite myself I was interested.

“Yes,” she began to talk faster, growing more excited with each passing moment. “The way I’ve worked it out, it’s per-

fectly safe. To start with, George will be asleep — he won't know anything about it. When his sleeping mind moves into my body, why, it will simply stay asleep! On the other hand, when *my* mind moves into *his* body, then I'll be able to move about and ——"

"And use your brother as a keyhole!" I blurted, surprising even myself. She frowned, then turned her face away. What she planned was wrong. I knew it and so did she, but if my outburst had shamed her it certainly had not deterred her — not for long.

When she looked at me again her eyes were almost pleading. "I know how it must look to you, Love, but it's not so. And I know that I must seem to be a selfish woman, but that's not quite true either. Isn't it natural that I should want to see my family? They are mine, you know. George, my brother; his wife, my sister-in-law; their children, my nephew and niece. Just a — yes — a 'peep,' if that's the way you see it. But, Love, I *need* that peep. I'll only have a few moments, and I'll have to make them last me for the rest of my life."

I began to weaken. "How will you go about it?"

"First, a glance," she eagerly answered, again reminding me of a young girl. "Nothing more, a mere glance. Even if he's awake he won't ever know I was there; he'll think his mind wandered for the merest second. If he *is* asleep, though, then I'll be able to, well, 'wake him up,' see his wife — and, if the children are still at home, why, I'll be able to see them too. Just a glance."

"But suppose something does go wrong?" I asked bluntly, coming back to earth. "Why, you might come back and find your head in the gas oven! What's to stop him from slashing your wrists? That only takes a second, you know."

“That’s where you come in, Love.” She stood up and patted me on the cheek, smiling cleverly. “You’ll be right here to see that nothing goes wrong.”

“But —”

“And to be doubly sure,” she cut me off, “why, *I’ll be tied in my chair!* You can’t walk through windows when you’re tied down, now can you?”

Half an hour later, still suffering inwardly from that as yet unspecified foreboding, I had done as Aunt Hester directed me to do, tying her wrists to the arms of her cane chair with soft but fairly strong bandages from her medicine cabinet in the bathroom.

She had it all worked out, reasoning that it would be very early morning in Australia and that her brother would still be sleeping. As soon as she was comfortable, without another word, she closed her eyes and let her head fall slowly forward onto her chest. Outside, the sun still had some way to go to setting; inside, the room was still warm — yet I shuddered oddly with a deep, nervous chilling of my blood.

It was then that I tried to bring the thing to a halt, calling her name and shaking her shoulder, but she only brushed my hand away and hushed me. I went back to my chair and watched her anxiously.

As the shadows seemed visibly to lengthen in the room and my skin cooled, her head sank even deeper onto her chest, so that I began to think she had fallen asleep. Then she settled herself more comfortably yet and I saw that she was still awake, merely preparing her body for her brother’s slumbering mind.

In another moment I knew that something had changed. Her

position was as it had been; the shadows crept slowly still; the ancient clock on the wall ticked its regular chronological message; but I had grown inexplicably colder, and there was this feeling that *something* had changed. . . .

Suddenly there flashed before my mind's eye certain of those warning jottings I had read only a few nights earlier, and there and then I was determined that this thing should go no further. Oh, she had warned me not to do anything to frighten or disturb her, but this was different. Somehow I knew that if I didn't act now —

"Hester! Aunt Hester!" I jumped up and moved toward her, my throat dry and my words cracked and unnatural-sounding. And she lifted her head and opened her eyes.

For a moment I thought that everything was all right — then. . . .

She cried out and stood up, ripped bandages falling in tatters from strangely strong wrists. She mouthed again, staggering and patently disorientated. I fell back in dumb horror, knowing that something was very wrong and yet unable to put my finger on the trouble.

My aunt's eyes were wide now and bulging, and for the first time she seemed to see me, stumbling toward me with slack jaw and tongue protruding horribly between long teeth and drawn-back lips. It was then that I knew what was wrong, that this frightful *thing* before me was not my aunt, and I was driven backward before its stumbling approach, warding it off with waving arms and barely articulate cries.

Finally, stumbling more frenziedly now, clawing at empty air inches in front of my face, she — it — spoke: "No!" the awful

voice gurgled over its wriggling tongue. "No, Hester, you . . . you *fool!* I warned you. . . ."

And in that same instant I saw not an old woman, but the horribly alien figure of *a man in a woman's form!*

More grotesque than any drag artist, the thing pirouetted in grim, constricting agony, its strange eyes glazing even as I stared in a paralysis of horror. Then it was all over and the frail scarecrow of flesh, purple tongue still protruding from frothing lips, fell in a crumpled heap to the floor.

That's it, that's the story — not a tale I've told before, for there would have been too many questions, and it's more than possible that my version would not be believed. Let's face it, who *would* believe me? No, I realized this as soon as the thing was done, and so I simply got rid of the torn bandages and called in a doctor. Aunt Hester died of a heart attack, or so I'm told, and perhaps she did — straining to do that which, even with her powers, should never have been possible.

During this last fortnight or so since it happened, I've been trying to convince myself that the doctor was right (which I was quite willing enough to believe at the time), but I've been telling myself lies. I think I've known the real truth ever since my parents got the letter from Australia. And lately, reinforcing that truth, there have been the dreams and the daydreams — *or are they?*

This morning I woke up to a lightless void — a numb, black, silent void — wherein I was incapable of even the smallest movement, and I was horribly, hideously frightened. It lasted for only a moment, that's all, but in that moment it seemed to me

that I was dead — or that the living ME inhabited a dead body!

Again and again I find myself thinking back on the mad Arab's words as reported by Joachim Feery: "... even from beyond the Grave of Sod. . . ." And in the end I know that this is indeed the answer.

That is why I'm flying tomorrow to Australia. Ostensibly I'm visiting my uncle's wife, my Australian aunt; but really I'm only interested in him, in Uncle George himself. I don't know what I'll be able to do, or even if there is anything I *can* do. My efforts may well be completely useless, and yet I must try to do something.

I *must* try, for I know now that it's that or find myself once again, perhaps permanently, locked in that hellish, nighted — place? — of black oblivion and insensate silence. In the dead and rotting body of my Uncle George, already buried three weeks when Aunt Hester put her mind in his body — *the body she's now trying to vacate in favor of mine!*

No Way Home

If you motor up the M1 past Lanchester from London and come off before Bankhead heading west across the country, within a very few miles you enter an area of gently rolling green hills, winding country roads and Olde Worlde villages with quaint wooden-beamed street-corner pubs and noonday cats atop leaning ivied walls. The roads there are narrow, climbing gently up and ribboning back down the green hills, rolling between fields, meandering casually through woods and over brick- and wooden-bridged streams; the whole background forms a pattern of peace and tranquillity rarely disturbed over the centuries.

By night, though, the place takes on a different aspect. An almost miasmal aura of timelessness, of antiquity, hangs over the brooding woods and dark hamlets. The moon silvers winding hedgerows and ancient thatched roofs, and when the pubs close and the last lights blink out in farm and cottage windows, then it is as if Night had thrown her blackest cloak over the land, when even the most powerful headlight's beam penetrates the resultant darkness only with difficulty. Enough to allow you to drive on the narrower roads, if you drive slowly and carefully.

Strangers motoring through this region — even in daylight hours — are known occasionally to lose their way, to drive the same labyrinthine lanes for hours on end in meaningless circles. The contours of the countryside often seem to defy even the most accurate sense of direction, and the roads and tracks never

quite seem to tally with printed maps of the area. There are rumors almost as old as the area itself that persons have been known to pass into oblivion here — like gray smoke from cottage chimneystacks disappearing into air — never to come out again.

Not that George Benson was a stranger. True, he had not been home to England for many years — since running off as a youth, later to marry and settle in Germany — but as a boy he had known this place well and must have cycled for thousands of miles along dusty summer roads, lanes and tracks, even bridle paths through the heart of this very region.

And that was why he was so perturbed now: not because of a pack of lies and fairy stories and old wives' tales heard as a boy, but because this *was* his home territory, where he'd been born and reared. Indeed, he felt more than perturbed, stupid almost. A fellow drives all the way north through Germany from Dortmund, catches the car ferry from Bremerhaven into Harwich, rolls on upcountry having made the transition from right- to left-of-the-road driving with only a very small effort . . . and then hopelessly loses himself within only a fistful of miles from home!

Anger at his own supposed stupidity turned to bitter memories of his wife, then to an even greater anger. And a hurt. . . .

It didn't hurt half so much now, though, not now that it was all over. But the anger was still there. And the memories of the milk of marriage gone sour. Greta had just up and left home one day. George, employing the services of a detective agency, had traced his wife to Hamburg, where he'd found her in the bed of

a nightclub crooner, an old boyfriend who finally had made it good.

“Damn all Krauts!” George cursed now as he checked the speed of his car to read out the legend on a village nameboard. His headlights picked the letters out starkly in the surrounding darkness. “Middle Hamborough? — Never bloody heard of it!” Again he cursed as, making a quick decision, he spun the steering wheel to turn his big car about on the narrow road. He would have to start backtracking, something he hated doing because it seemed so inefficient, so wasteful. “And blast and damn all Kraut cars!” he added as his front wheels bounced jarringly onto and back off the high stone roadside curb.

“Greta!” he quietly growled to himself as he drove back down the road away from the outskirts of Middle Hamborough. “What a *bitch*!” For of course she had blamed him for their troubles, saying that she couldn’t stand his meanness. Him, George Benson, mean! She simply hadn’t appreciated money. She’d thought that Deutsche-marks grew on trees, that pfennigs gathered like dew on the grass in the night. George, on the other hand, had inherited much of the pecuniary instincts of his father, a Yorkshireman of the Old School — and of Scottish stock to boot — who really understood the value of “brass.” His old man had used to say: “Thee tak care o’ the pennies, Georgie, an’ the pounds’ll tak care o’ theysels!”

George’s already pinched face tightened skull like as his thoughts again returned to Greta. She had wanted children. Children! Damned lucky thing he had known better than to accept *that*! For God’s sake, who could afford children?

Then she’d complained about the food — like she’d been

complaining for years — saying that she was getting thin because the money he gave her was never enough. But George liked his women willowy and fragile; that way there was never much fight in them.

Well, he'd certainly misjudged Greta, there had been plenty of fight left in her. And their very last fight had been about food, too. He had wanted her to buy food in bulk at the supermarkets for cheapness; in turn she'd demanded a deep freezer so that the food she bought wouldn't go bad; finally George had gone off the deep end when she told him how much the freezer she had in mind would cost!

She left him that same day; moreover, she ate the last of the *wurstchen* before she went! George grinned mirthlessly as he gripped the steering wheel tighter, wishing it were Greta's scrawny neck. By God — she'd be sorry when she was fat!

Still, George had had the last laugh. Their home had been paid for fifty-fifty, but it had been in George's name. He had sold it; likewise the furniture and the few clothes she left behind. The car had been half hers, too — but again in George's name, for Greta couldn't drive. It was all his now: his money, his car, everything. As he'd done so often in the last twenty-four hours, he took one hand from the wheel to pat reassuringly the fat wallet where its outline bulged out the upper right front of his jacket.

It was the thought of money that sent George's mind casting back an hour or so to a chance encounter at Harvey's All-Night-Grill, just off the M1. This drunk had been there — oh, a real joker, and melancholy with it, too — but he had been so well-heeled! George remembered the man's queer offer: "Just show me the way home, that's all — and all I've got you can

have!’’ And he had carried a bankbook showing a credit of over two thousand pounds. . . .

That last was hearsay, though, passed on to George by Harvey himself, the stubble-jawed, greasy-aproned owner of the place. Now that earlier accidental meeting and conversation suddenly jumped up crystal clear in George’s mind.

It had started when George mentioned to Harvey that he was heading for Bellington; that was when the other fellow had started to take an interest in him and had made his weird offer about being shown the way home.

God damn! George sat bolt upright behind the steering wheel. Come to think of it, he had heard of Middle Hamborough before. Surely that was the name of the place the drunk had been looking for — for fifteen years!

George hadn’t paid much attention to the man at the time, had barely listened to his gabbled, drunken pleading. He’d passed the fellow off quite simply as some nut who’d heard those fanciful old rumors about people getting lost in the surrounding countryside, a drunk who was making a big play of his own personal little fantasy. He would be all right when he sobered up.

Now that George thought about it, though — well, why should anyone make up a story like that? And come to think of it, the man hadn’t seemed all that drunk. More tired and, well, *lost*, really. . . .

Just then, cresting a low hill, as his headlights flashed across the next shallow valley, George saw the house with the big garden and the long drive winding up to it. The place stood to the right of the road, atop the next hill, and the gravel drive rose up from an ornamental stone arch and iron gate at the roadside. Dipping down the road and climbing the low hill, George read

the wrought-iron legend on the gate: "High House"! And now he remembered more of the — drunk's? — story.

The man had called himself Kent, and fifteen years ago, on his tenth wedding anniversary, he'd left home one morning to drive to London, there to make certain business arrangements with city-dwelling colleagues. He had taken a fairly large sum of money with him when he drove from High House, the home he himself had designed and built, and this had worked out just as well for him. Turning right off the Middle Hamborough road through Meadington and onto the London road at Bankhead, Kent had driven to the city. And in London —

Kent was a partner in a building concern with head offices in the city . . . or at least he had been. For in London he discovered that the firm had never existed, that his colleagues, Milton and Jones, while they themselves were real enough, swore they had never heard of him. "Milton, Jones & Kent" did not exist; the firm was known simply as "Milton & Jones." Not only did they not know him, they tried to have him jailed for attempted fraud!

That was only the start of it, for the real horror came when he tried to get back home — only to discover that there just wasn't any way home! George remembered now Kent's apparently drunken phrase: "A strange dislocation of space and time, a crossing of probability tracks, a passage between parallel dimensions — and a subsequent *snapping-back* of space-time elastic. . . ." Now surely only a drunk would say something like that? A drunk or a nut.

Except Harvey had insisted that Kent was sober. He was just tired, Harvey said, confused, half mad trying to solve a fifteen-year-old problem that wasn't. There had never been a Middle

Hamborough, Harvey insisted. The place wasn't shown on any map; you couldn't find it in the telephone directory; no trains, buses, or roads went there. Middle Hamborough wasn't!

But Middle Hamborough *was*, George had seen it, or ——

Could it be that greasy old Harvey had somehow been fooling that clown all these years, milking his money drop by drop, cashing in on some mental block or other? Or had they both simply been pulling George's leg? If so, well, it certainly seemed a queer sort of joke. . . .

George glanced at his watch. Just 11:00 P.M. Damn it, he'd planned to be in Bellington by now, at home with the old folks, and he would have been if he'd come off the M1 at the right place.

Of course, when he'd left England there had been no motorway as such, just another road stretching away north and south. That was where he'd gone wrong, obviously; he'd come off the M1 too soon. He should have gone on to the next exit. Well, all right, he'd kill two birds with one stone. He'd go back to Harvey's all-nighter, check out the weird one's story again, then see if he couldn't perhaps latch on to some of the joker's small change to cover his time. Then he'd try to pick up a map of the area before heading home. He couldn't go wrong with a map — now could he?

Having decided his course, and considering the winding roads and pitch darkness, George put his foot down and sped back to Harvey's place. Parking his car, he walked in through the open door into the unhealthy atmosphere and lighting of the so-called cafeteria (where the lights were kept low, George suspected, to make the young cockroaches on the walls less conspicuous).

He went straight to the service counter and carefully rested

his elbows upon it, avoiding the splashes of sticky coffee and spilled grease. Of the equally greasy proprietor he casually enquired regards Mr. Kent's whereabouts.

"Eh? Kent? He'll be in his room. I let him lodge here, y'know. He doesn't like to be too far from this area. . . ."

"You *let* him lodge here?" George asked, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"Well, y'know — he pays a bit."

George nodded, silently repeating the other's words: Yeah, I'll *bet* he pays a bit!

"G'night there!" Harvey waved a stained dishcloth at a departing truck driver and his mate. "See y'next time." He turned back to George with a scowl. "Anyway, what's it to you, about Kent? After making y'self a quick quid or two?"

"How do you mean?" George returned, assuming a hurt look. "It's just that I think I might be able to help the poor bloke out, that's all."

"Oh?" Harvey looked suspicious. "How's that, then?"

"Well, half an hour ago I was on the road to Middle Ham-borough, and I passed a place set back off the road called High House. I just thought —"

"'Ere," Harvey cut in, a surprisingly fast hand shooting out to catch George's jacket front and pull him close so that their faces almost met across the service counter. "You tryin' t' be clever, chief?"

"Well, I'll be —" George spluttered, genuinely astonished. "What the hell do you think you're —"

"'Cos if you are — you an' me'll fall out, we will!"

George carefully disengaged himself. "Well," he said, "I

think that answers one of my questions, at least.”

“Eh? What d’you mean?” Harvey asked, still looking surly. George backed off a step.

“Looks to me like you’re as mad as him, attacking me like that. I mean, I might have expected you to laugh, seeing as how I fell for your funny little joke — but I’d hardly think you’d get all physical.”

“What the merry ’ell are you on about?” Harvey questioned, a very convincing frown creasing his forehead. “What joke?”

“Why, about Middle Hamborough, about it not being on any map and about no roads going there and Kent looking for the place for fifteen years. I’m on about a place that’s not twenty minutes’ fast drive from here, signposted clear as the City of London!”

Suddenly Harvey’s unwashed features paled visibly. “You mean you’ve actually *seen* this place?” he whispered. “And you drove past . . . High House?”

“Damn right!” George answered, abruptly feeling as though things were all unreal, a very vivid but meaningless daydream.

Harvey lifted a flap in the counter and waddled through to George’s side. He was a very big man, George suddenly noticed, and the color had come back to his face with a vengeance. There was a red, angry tinge to the man’s sallow features now; moreover, the cafeteria was quite empty of other souls, all bar the two of them.

“Now look here —” George blurted, as Harvey began to maneuver him into a corner.

“I shouldn’t ’ave mentioned ’is money, should I?” the fat

man cut him off, his piggy eyes fastening upon those of his patently intended victim, making his question more a statement than a question proper.

“See,” he continued, “I’d ’ad a couple of pints earlier, or I wouldn’t ’ave let it drop about ’is predicament. ’E’s been right good to me, Mr. Kent ’as. ’Elped me set this place up proper, ’e did — an’ I don’t cotton to the idea of some flyboy tryin’ to —”

Again his arm shot out and he grabbed Benson’s throat this time, trapping him in the dim corner. “So you’ve been down the road to Middle Hamborough, ’ave you? — And you’ve seen High House, eh? Well, let me tell you, I’ve been looking for that place close on six years, me an’ ol’ Kent, an’ not so much as a peep!

“Now I knows ’e’s a bit of a nut, but I *like* ’im an’ we gets on fine. Stays ’ere, cheap like, ’e does, an’ we do a bit of motorin’ in ’is ol’ car — lookin’ for those places you say you’ve seen, y’know? But we never finds ’em, an’ we never will, ’cos they’re not there, see? Kent bein’ a decent gent, I ’umors ’im an’ things is OK. But I’m no crook, if you see what I mean, though I’m not so sure I can say the same for everybody!” He peered pointedly at George, releasing the pressure on his wind-pipe enough for him to croak:

“I tell you I *have* seen High House; or at least, I saw a place of that name and answering the description I heard from Kent. And I *have* been on the road to —”

“*What’s that about High House?*” The question was a hoarse, quavering whisper — hesitant, and yet filled with excited expectancy. Hearing that whisper, Harvey immediately released

his grip on Benson's neck and turned to move over quickly to the thin, gray-haired, middle-aged man who had appeared out of a back room behind the service counter.

"Don't get yourself all upset, Mr. Kent," Harvey protested, holding up his hands solicitously. "It's just some bloke tryin' to pull a fast one, an' —"

"But I heard him say —" Kent's eyes were wide, staring past the fat proprietor straight at Benson where he stood, still shaken, in the corner.

George found his voice again. "I said I'd seen High House, on the road to Middle Hamborough — and I did see it." He shook himself, straightening his tie and shrugging his disarranged jacket back into position. "But I didn't come back in here to get involved with a couple of nuts. And I don't think much of your joke."

George turned away and made for the door; then, remembering his previous trouble, he turned back to face Harvey. "Do you have a map of the area by any chance? I've been in Germany for a long time and seem to be out of touch over here. I can't seem to find my way about any more."

For a moment Kent continued to stare very hard at the speaker; then he turned to Harvey. "He — he got *lost*! And he says he's seen High House. . . ! I've got to believe him. I daren't miss the chance that —"

Almost sure by now that he was the victim of some cockeyed leg-pull (and yet still experiencing niggling little subconscious doubts), George Benson shrugged. "OK. No map," he grumbled. "Well, good night, boys. Maybe I'll drop in again some time — like next visiting day!"

"No, wait!" the thin man cried. "Do you think that you can find . . . that you can find High House again?" His voice went back to a whisper on the last half-dozen words.

"Sure, I can find it again," George told him, nodding his head. "But it's well out of my way."

"I'll make it worth your trouble," Kent quickly answered, his voice rising rapidly in what sounded to George like a bad case of barely suppressed hysteria. "I'll make it very worth while indeed!"

George was not the man to pass up a good thing. "My car's outside," he said. "Do you want to ride with me, or will you follow in your own car?"

"I'll ride with you. My hands are shaking so badly that I —"

"I'm coming with you," Harvey suddenly grunted, taking off his greasy apron.

"No, no, my friend," Kent turned to him. "If we don't find High House, I'll be back. Until then, and just in case we do find it, this is for all you've done." His hand was still shaking as he took out a checkbook and quickly, nervously scribbled. He passed the check to Harvey and George managed to get a good look at it. His eyes went wide when he saw the amount it was made out for. Five hundred pounds!

"Now look 'ere, Mr. Kent," Harvey blustered. "I don't like the looks of this bloke. I reckon —"

"I understand your concern," the older man told him, "but I'm sure Mr. —?" he turned to George.

"Er, Smith," George told him, unwilling to reveal his real name. This could still be some crazy joke, but if so, it would be on some bloke called "Smith," and not on George Benson!

"I'm sure that Mr. Smith is legitimate. And in any case I daren't miss the chance to get . . . to get back home." He was eager now to be on his way. "Are you ready, Mr. Smith?"

"Just as soon as you say," George told him. "The sooner the better."

They walked out into the night, to George's car, leaving fat greasy Harvey worriedly squeezing his hands in the doorway to his all-nighter. Suddenly the night air seemed inordinately cold, and as George opened the passenger door to let Kent get in, he shivered. He walked round the car, climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door.

As George started up the motor, Kent spoke up from where he crouched against the opposite door, a huddled shape in the dark interior of the car. "Are you sure that — that —"

"Look," George answered, the utter craziness of the whole business abruptly dawning on him, souring his voice, "if this is some sort of nutty joke. . . ." He let the threat hang, then snapped, "Of course I can find it again! High House, you're talking about?"

"Yes, yes. High House. The home I built for the woman who lives there, waiting for me."

"For fifteen years?" George allowed himself to indulge in the other's fantasy.

"She would wait until time froze!" Kent leaned over to spit the words in George's ear. "And in any case, I have a theory."

Yeah! George thought to himself. *Me, too!* Out loud, he said, "A theory?"

"Yes. I think — I hope — it's possible that time itself is frozen at the moment of the fracture. If I can get back, it may all be un-

changed. I may even regain my lost years!”

“A parallel dimension, eh?” George said, feeling strangely nervous.

“Right,” his passenger nodded emphatically. “That’s the way I see it.”

Humoring him, George asked, “What’s it like, this other world of yours?”

“Why, it’s just like this world — except that there’s a village called Middle Hamborough, and a house on a hill, and a building firm called Milton, Jones & Kent. There are probably other differences, too, but I haven’t found any yet to concern me. Do you know the theory of parallel worlds?”

“I’ve read some science fiction,” George guardedly answered. “Some of these other dimensions, or whatever they’re supposed to be, are just like this world. Maybe a few odd differences, like you say. Others are different, completely different. Horrible and alien — stuff like that.” He suddenly felt stupid. “That’s what I’ve read, anyway. Load of rubbish!”

“Rubbish?” Kent grunted, stirring in his seat. “I wish it were. But, anyway, you’ve got the right idea. Why are you stopping?”

“See that sign?” George said, pointing through the windshield to where the headlights lit up a village nameboard. “Meadington, just a few miles down the road. We’re through Meadington in about five minutes. Then we turn left where it’s signposted to Middle Hamborough. Another five minutes after that and we’re at High House. You said it would be worth my while?”

Now comes the crunch, George told himself. This is where the idiot bursts out laughing — and that’s when I brain him!

But Kent didn’t laugh. Instead he got out his checkbook, and

George switched on the interior light to watch him write a note for. . . .

George's eyes bulged as he saw the numbers go down on the crisp paper. First a one, followed by three zeros! One thousand pounds! "This won't bounce?" he asked suspiciously, his hand trembling as he reached for the check.

"It won't bounce," said Kent, folding the note and tucking it into his pocket. "Fortunately, my money was good for this world, too. You get it when we get to High House."

"You have a deal," George told him, putting the car in gear. They drove through slumbering Meadington, its roofs and hedges silvered in a moonlight that shone through the promise of a mist. Leaving the village behind, the car sped along the country road, but after a few minutes George pulled into the curb and stopped. His passenger had slumped down in his seat.

"Are you OK?" George asked.

"There's no turnoff," Kent sobbed. "We should have passed it before now. I've driven down this road a thousand, five thousand times in the last fifteen years, and tonight it's just the same as always. There's no turnoff, no signpost to Middle Ham-borough!"

"Yeah," George chewed his lip, unwilling to accept defeat so easily. "We must have missed it. It wasn't this far out of Meadington last time." He turned the big car about, driving onto the grass verge to do so, then headed back towards Meadington.

George was angry now and more than a little puzzled. He'd been watching for that signpost as keenly as his passenger. How the hell could they have missed it? No matter, this time he'd drive dead slow. He knew the road was there, for he'd been down it and back once already tonight!

Sure enough, with the first of Meadington's roofs glimmering silver in the near distance, a dilapidated signpost suddenly showed up in the beam of the car's lights. It pointed across the tarmac to where the surface of a second road ribboned away into the milky moonlight; a sign whose legend, though grimy, was nevertheless amply legible: Middle Hamborough.

And quite as suddenly George Benson's passenger was sitting bolt upright in his seat, his whole body visibly trembling while his eyes stood out like organ stops, staring madly at the signpost. "Middle Hamborough!" he cried, his voice pitched so high it almost broke. And again: "Middle Hamborough, Middle Hamborough!"

"Sure," said George, an unnatural chill racing up his spine. "I told you I could find it!" And to himself he added, *But I'm damned if I know how we missed it the first time!*

He turned onto the new road, noticing the second signpost at his right as he did so. That was the one they'd missed. Perhaps it had been in the shadows; but in any case, what odds? They were on the right road now.

Kent's trembling had stopped, and his voice was quite steady when he said, "You really don't know how much I owe you, Mr. Smith. You shall have your check, of course, but if it were for a million pounds, it wouldn't really be enough." His face was dark in the car's interior, and his silhouette looked different somehow.

George said, "You realize that fat Harvey's been having you on all this time, don't you?" His voice became quite gentle as he added: "You know, you really ought to see someone about it — about all . . . *this*, I mean. People can take advantage of you. Harvey could have brought you here any time he wanted."

Suddenly Kent laughed, a young laugh that had more than a

trace of weary hysteria in it. "Oh, you don't know the half of it, do you, Mr. Smith? Can't you get it through your head that I'm not mad and no one is trying to make a fool of you? This is all real. My story is the truth. I *was* lost in an alien dimension, in your world, but now I'm finally back in my own. You may believe me, Mr. Smith, that you have earned your thousand pounds!"

George was almost convinced. Certainly Kent seemed sincere enough. "Well, OK — whatever you say. But I'll tell you something, Mr. Kent. If that check of yours bounces when I try to cash it tomorrow, I'll be back, and you better believe I'll find High House again!"

The silhouette turned in its seat in an attitude of concern. "Do me a favor, will you, Mr. Smith? If — just *if*, you understand — if you can't find the road back to Meadington, don't hesitate to —"

George cut him off with a short bark of a laugh. "You must be joking! I'll find it, all right." His voice went hard again. "And I'll find you, too, if ——"

But he paused as, at the top of the next low hill, the headlights illuminated a house standing above the road at the end of a winding drive. George's passenger grabbed his elbow in terrific excitement. "High House!" Kent cried, his voice wild and exultant. "High House! You've done it!"

George grunted in answer, revving the car down into the valley and up the hill to pull in to a halt outside the wrought-iron gates. He reached across to catch hold of his passenger's coat as Kent tried to scramble from the car. "Kent!"

"Oh, yes, your check," answered the young man, turning to smile excitedly at George in the yellow light from the little lamp on the gate. . . .

George's jaw dropped. Oh, this was Kent, all right. Little doubt

about that. Same features, same suit, same trembling hand that reached into a pocket to bring out the folded check and place it in George's suddenly clammy hand. But it was a hand that trembled now in excitement and not frustrated but undying hope — *and it was a Kent fifteen years younger!*

One thousand pounds, and at last George knew that he had indeed earned it!

Kent turned and threw open the gates, racing up the drive like a wild man. In the house, lights were starting to go on. George fingered his check unbelievably and ran his tongue over dry lips. His mind seemed to have frozen over, so that only one phrase kept repeating in his brain. It was something Kent had said: "If you can't find the road back to —"

He gunned the motor, spinning the car wildly round in a spray of gravel chips. Up on the hill at the top of the drive, Kent was vaulting the fence, and a figure in white was waiting in the garden for him, open arms held wide. George tore his eyes away from them and roared down the hill. For the second time that night he headed for the Meadington road.

The check lay on the empty passenger seat now where he'd dropped it, and money was quite the last thing in George's mind as he drove his car in an unreasoning panic, leaping the low hills like some demon hurdler as he tried to make it back to the main road before — before what? A hideous doubt was blossoming in his mind, growing like some evil genie from a bottle and taking on a horrible form.

All those stories about queer dislocations of space and time — the signpost for Middle Hamborough that was, then wasn't, then was again — and of course Kent's story, and his . . . rejuvenation?

"I will be very glad," George told himself out loud, "when I reach that junction just outside of Meadington!" For one thing, he could have sworn that it wasn't this much of a drive. He should surely have been there by now. Ah, yes, this would be it coming up now, just around this slight bend. . . .

No junction!

The road stretched straight on ahead, narrow and suddenly ominous in the sweeping beam of his lights. All right, so the junction was a little further than he'd reckoned. George put his foot down even harder to send the big car racing along the narrow road. The miles flew by without a single signpost or junction, and a ground mist came in that forced George to slow down. He would have done so anyway, for now the road seemed to be exerting a strange pull on his car. The big motor felt as if it were slowing down! George's heart almost jumped into his mouth. There couldn't be anything wrong with the car, could there?

Braking to a halt and switching off the car's engine and lights, George climbed out of the driver's seat. He breathed the damp night air. On unpleasantly rubbery legs he walked round to the front of the car and lifted the hood. An inspection light came on and he cast a quick, practiced glance over the motor. No, he'd worked in a garage for many years and he knew a good motor when he saw one. Nothing wrong with the car, so —

As he straightened up, George felt an unaccustomed suction on his shoes and glanced down at the road. The surface was rubbery, formed of a sort of tough sponge. A worried frown crossed George's face as he bent to feel that peculiar surface. He'd never seen a road surfaced with stuff like that before!

It was as he straightened up again that he heard the tinkling, like the sound of tiny bells from somewhere off the road. Yes,

there set back from the road, he could make out a row of low squat houses, like great mushrooms partly obscured by the mist that swirled now in strange currents. The tinkling came from the houses.

The outskirts of a village? George wondered. Well, at least he'd be able to get directions. He stepped off the road onto turf and made for the houses, only slowing down when he saw how featureless and alike they all looked. The queer tinkling went on, sounding like the gentle noises that the hangings on a Christmas tree make in a draft. Other than that there was only the billowing mist and the darkness.

Reaching the first house, stepping very slowly now, George came up close to the wall and stared at it. It was gray, completely featureless. All the houses looked alike. They were indeed like enormous mushrooms. No windows. Overhanging roofs. Flaps of sorts that might just be doors, or there again —

The tinkling had stopped. Very carefully George reached out and touched the wall in front of him. It felt warm . . . and it crept beneath his fingers!

Deliberately and slowly George turned about and forced one foot out in front of the other. Then he took a second step. He fought the urge to look back over his shoulder until, halfway to the mist-wreathed car, he heard an odd plopping sound behind him. It was like the *ploop* you get throwing a handful of mud into a pond. He froze with his back still turned to the houses.

Quite suddenly he felt sure that his ears were enlarging, stretching back and up to form saucerlike receivers on top of his head. Everything he had went into those ears, and all of it was trying to tune in on what was going on behind him. He didn't turn, but simply stood still; and again there was only the utter silence,

loud in his strangely sensitized ears. He forced his dead feet to take a few more paces forward — and sure enough the sound came again, repeating this time: *ploop, ploop, ploop!*

George slowly pivoted on his heel as muscles he never knew he had began to jump in his face. The noises, each *ploop* sounding closer than the last, stopped immediately. His legs felt like twin columns of jelly, but he somehow completed his turn. He stumbled spastically then, arms flailing to keep himself from falling. The nearest house, or cottage, or whatever, *was right there behind him, within arm's reach!*

Suddenly George's heart, which he was sure had stopped forever, became audible again inside him, banging away in his chest like a trip-hammer. All in one movement he turned and bounded for the car, wondering why with each leap he should stay so long in the air, knowing that in fact his body was moving like greased lightning while his mind (in an even greater hurry, one his body couldn't even attempt to match) thought he was in reverse!

Not bothering, not *daring* to look back again, he almost wrenched the car door from its hinges as he threw himself into the driving seat. Then, in an instant that lasted several centuries, his hand was on the ignition key and the engine was roaring. As he spun the car about in a squeal of tortured tires and accelerated up the rubbery road, he looked in his rearview mirror — and immediately wished he hadn't!

The "houses" were all plooping down the road after him — like great greedy frogs — and their "doors" were wide open!

George nearly went off the road then, wrenching at the wheel with clammy hands as he fought to control his careening car on the peculiar surface. A million monstrous thoughts raced

through his head as he climbed up through the gears. For of course he knew now for certain that he was trapped in an alien dimension, that the space-time elastic had snapped back into place behind him, stranding him here. Wherever "here" was!

It was only several miles later that he thought to slow down, and only then after passing a junction on the right and a signpost saying: Middle Hamborough 5½ Miles. His heart gave a wild leap as he skidded to a halt on a once more perfectly normal tarmac road. Why, that sign meant that just half a mile up the road in front he'd find Meadington, and beyond Meadington . . . Bankhead and the M1!

. . . Except that Meadington wasn't there. . . .

Instead, the mist came up again and, worse, the road went rubbery. And no sign of Meadington. When he saw a row of mushroom "houses" standing back from the road, George did an immediate, violent about-turn, rocking the car dangerously on the rubbery road. Trouble with this weird surface was that it gave too much damn traction.

Amazing that he could still think such mundane thoughts in a situation like this. And yet, through all of this protracted nightmare, a ray of hope still shone. The road to Middle Hamborough!

Back there, down that road, there was a house on a hill and beyond that a real, if slightly different, world. A world where at least two of the inhabitants owed him a break. From what Kent had told him, it seemed to George that the other world wasn't much different from his own. He could make a go of things there. He gunned his motor back down the road and out of the mist, back onto a decent tarmac surface and into normally dark night,

turning left at the leaning signpost onto the now familiar road to Middle Hamborough.

Or was it familiar?

The hedges bordering the road were different somehow, taller, hiding the fields beyond them from the car's probing headlights, and the road seemed narrower than George remembered it. But that must be his imagination acting up after the terrific shocks of the last ten or twenty minutes; it *had* to be, for this was the road to Middle Hamborough.

Then, cresting the next hill, suddenly George felt that hellish drag on his tires, and his headlights began to do battle with a thickening, swirling mist. At the same time he saw the house atop the next hill, the house set back off the road at the head of a long winding drive. High House!

There were no lights on in the place now, but it was George's refuge nonetheless. Hadn't Kent told him to come back here if he couldn't find his way back to Meadington? George gave a whoop of relief as he swept down into the shallow valley and up the hill towards the wrought-iron roadside gates. They were still open, as Kent had left them; and as he slowed down fractionally, George swung the wheel to the left, turning his car in through the gates. They weren't quite open all the way, though, so that the front of the car slammed them back on their hinges.

Up the drive the front lights of the house instantly came on; two of them that glowed yellow as though shutters had been quickly opened — or lids lifted! George had no time to note anything else — except perhaps that the drive was very white, not the white of gravel but more of leprous flesh — for at that point the car simply stopped as if it had run head-on into a brick wall!

George wasn't belted in. He rose up over the steering wheel and crashed through the windshield, automatically turning his shoulder to the glass.

He hit the drive in a shower of glass fragments, screaming and expecting the impact to hurt. It didn't, and then George knew why the car had stopped like that: the drive was as soft and sticky as hot toffee. And it wasn't a drive!

Behind George the wide fleshy ribbon *tasted* the car and, rising up, flicked it easily to one side. Then it tasted George. He had time to scream, barely, and time for one more quite mundane thought — that this wasn't where Kent lived — before that great white chameleon tongue slithered him up the hill to the house, whose entire front below the yellow windows opened up to receive him.

Shortly thereafter the lights went slowly out again, as if someone had lowered shutters, or as if lids had fallen. . . .

The Horror at Oakdeene

In the summer of 1935 Martin Spellman went to work as a trainee mental nurse at Oakdeene Sanatorium. He was twenty-four years old and already dedicated — but not to nursing. Spellman's one ambition since his early teens had been to be an author; and since a rather odd and macabre turn of mind had dictated for his first projected work a compilation of rare or outstanding mental cases, he had decided that the best way to gain a first-hand insight on his subject — the *feel*, as it were, of asylums — would be to work in such an institute.

Of course, Spellman's real intention in applying for training was kept well hidden, but that did not mean that he was not going to try his best in the job to which he was committing himself. The minimum contract period was one year, with a further year of full-time nursing, and Martin cheerfully agreed to these terms in the furtherance of his project.

His colleagues and superior officers alike were quite astonished at the unaccustomed zeal with which young Spellman threw himself into his work, and every night that he was not on duty saw the light in his room burning well into the early hours. Martin had allotted his time off-duty in the following manner: for three hours he would study the theory of mental nursing, for five hours he would work on his book. This would leave him at least six hours for sleeping in any given twenty-four hour period. At those times when night duty came around — once or twice each

week — he would alter his schedule so as to spend the same amount of time in these aforementioned tasks.

Often Martin's immediate superior and tutor, Dr. Welford, caught him in the late summer and early autumn of the year working on his manuscripts; but who could complain about a student mental nurse writing a series of "theses" or correlations on the stranger, more complex cases of his calling? If anything Martin was to be congratulated on his studious attention to all details of his sanatorium routine.

In fact Spellman soon discovered that he did not like his work at the institute; his night-duties were an especial abomination, when on occasion he had of necessity to wander those lower corridors of Oakdeene wherein the worst patients were held resident. His harder, more stoic colleagues called the basement ward "Hell," and Martin Spellman would not have contested this seemingly harsh appellation. It *was* hell down there, with the corridor lights starkly illuminating the heavy doors with their little barred spy-holes and their labels bearing brief, typed case-histories of the occupants of the cells. Behind those doors, separated from Martin by only the thickness of the oak panels and battens and the rubbery wall-panels within, many of Britain's most terrible lunatics dwelt in the perpetual horror of their own madness, and Martin Spellman made sure when on night-duty that his hourly tours of Hell were undertaken with a thoroughly efficient but speedy dispatch.

One of Spellman's so-called "colleagues" at the sanatorium, Alan Barstowe (an ugly, squat-bodied, fully-trained nurse of some thirty-five years), was able on occasion to help the trainee out with his dread of the ward known as Hell. Barstowe, it seemed, had no fear of that part of night-duty whatever; indeed, in the

eerie atmosphere of the nighted asylum, he appeared to welcome the hourly visits to the lower ward. He would often exchange duties with Spellman, saying that he did not mind working nights — that in fact he preferred such duties to those of the daylight hours. Every man to his own tastes!

Spellman's room at the institute was on the ground floor — one of four bed-living-room combinations — separated from the two mental wards on the same floor by reinforced, soundproofed walls. With the recruiting of nurses at Oakdeene going badly, two of the four "living-in" rooms were empty. The other occupied room belonged to one Harold Moody, a fully-trained, middle-aged mental nurse whose partial deafness was certainly no handicap in living directly above Hell; the flooring of the ground-floor quarters was definitely *not* soundproof! Not that the sounds from below bothered Spellman often, but he did notice that Hell's inmates were always exceptionally vociferous whenever Alan Barstowe was on night-duty; and at those times the screams, moans, and gibberings from the basement ward seemed to penetrate the stone floor beneath his bed with an insistence that bothered him inwardly as well as keeping him physically awake often until four and five in the morning.

Eventually there came a time when the student and Barstowe were detailed for night-duty together, and frankly the younger man was not at all happy with the arrangement. For all Barstowe's apparent amicability, and quite apart from the contours of his face and body, there was something ugly about the man. And yet the evening shift started quite normally at 9:00 P.M., with nothing in Barstowe's manner to substantiate Spellman's feelings or cause him any untoward concern.

The orders for night-duty included the stipulation that each

ward would be visited — each cell, room, and occupant checked and, as far as possible, inspected once every hour. Martin Spellman had been detailed for duty in the lower wards and Hell, while Barstowe had the upper wards and the rooms of the quieter, less permanent inmates. At 11:00 P.M., when the student nurse was about to descend for the second time to the dreaded basement ward with its padding-muted gibberings, curses and moans, he was hailed from above as he stood at the top of the stone steps.

“Young Spellman! Hold on a minute,” the guttural voice of the froggish Barstowe came down to him. Looking up towards the first-floor landing, the trainee saw the squat man making his way quickly down the stairs. In his hand Barstowe carried what looked like a black stick, about eighteen inches long and with a silver tip.

As he descended, the nurse saw Spellman staring at his weapon and held it closer to his body, concealing it as best he could. “Come prepared, I always say,” he muttered with a strained grin as he came to a halt beside the trainee. “Look, Martin,” he quickly changed the subject, “I know you don’t care much for the lower wards and Hell — so if you fancy I’ll stay down here and you can carry on upstairs. I was just about to do Ward Four — so if you’d care to ——”

“Ward Four? I wouldn’t mind — but what’s *that* for, Barstowe?” Spellman pointedly indicated the stick which the older man had almost managed to hide in the clinical white folds of his smock. “I mean, it’s not as though they were about to break out!”

“No,” Barstowe answered, turning his eyes down and away, “it’s just that I feel more . . . more comfortable down there with a stick. You never know, do you?”

As Spellman climbed the stairs he retained in his mind's eye a mental picture of that stick of Barstowe's. If one of the officers got to know of the weapon, Barstowe would be in serious trouble. Not that the squat nurse could do the inmates any harm with the thing — if threatened through the bars of a spy-hole, an occupant would only have to move to the back of his cell to be out of harm's way — no, obviously it was as Barstowe had explained; his stick was simply a "comforter."

Nonetheless, Spellman could not help but remember those screams he listened to deep into the night whenever Barstowe was on duty in the basement ward. The funny thing was that later that night — even on the second floor, in the open rooms of the more trusted patients and in the corridors between those comparatively homely billets — the trainee nurse could *still* hear those muted, tortured echoes from Hell. . . .

Towards the end of October Martin Spellman's reading and studying for his book had taken a turn toward rather more specialized cases: in particular aberrations apparently influenced by imaginary or hallucinatory "outside" forces. He had seen definite connections in a fair number of reasonably well authenticated cases — connections which were especially interesting insofar as they depicted almost carbon-copy fancies, dreams, and delusions in the afflicted parties.

There was for instance the very well documented case of Joe Slater, the Catskill Mountains trapper, whose lunatic actions in 1900-01 had seemed governed not by the moon but rather by the influence of a point or object in the heavens much farther out than the orbit of Earth's satellite. The authenticity of this case,

however, seemed to Spellman spoiled by its chronicler's insistence that Slater was in fact inhabited by the mind of an alien being. Then there was the German Baron, Ernst Kant, who, before his hideous and inexplicable death in a Westphalian Bedlam, had believed his every insane action controlled by a creature he called Yibb-Tstll; described as being "huge and black with writhing breasts and an anus within its forehead, a black-blooded *thing* whose brains feed upon its own wastes. . . ."

More recently there was Dr. David Stephenson's recorded observations of one J. M. Freeth, a female zoophagous maniac whose declared intention was to *absorb* as many lives as she could. This she set about, like Bram Stoker's Renfield, by feeding flies to spiders, spiders to sparrows, and finally by devouring the sparrows herself! She, too, as with the maniac in Stoker's story, had been refused a cat once her intentions were quite clear! Her odd fancies had been part and parcel of her belief that she had watching over her a supernatural "God-creature" who would eventually come to release her. Miss Freeth's obsessions and her "life-devouring" mania were far from unique, and the student collected and recorded a number of similar cases.

Again, this time from the records of a certain Canton madhouse in America, Spellman culled the horrible story of an inmate who had been, before his escape and subsequent disappearance some seven years previously in 1928, completely sure of his immortality and of the fact that he would "dwell in Y'hathlei amidst wonder and glory forever. . . ." His destiny (he was righteous in his self assurance) was governed by "the Deep Ones, Dagon, and Lord Cthulhu" — with the former of which he would serve in the worship and glorification of the latter — whoever or whatever these names were supposed to signify! There was,

though, a clue to this last poor unfortunate's aberrations. He was pronouncedly ichthyic in appearance, with protuberant eyes and scaly skin, and it was believed that these physical abnormalities had led him to dwell too often and too long over certain obscure myths and legends involving oceanic deities. In this connection it seemed likely that his "Dagon" was that same fish-god of the Philistines and Phoenicians, sometimes known as Oannes.

So Spellman's studies grew more specific as the weeks passed, but he little dreamed that in a certain cell in Hell there resided a man whose case was as odd as any he had so far collected for his book. . . .

In mid-November, knowing something of the new direction his pupil's studies were taking, Dr. Welford invited Spellman to read the case-file of Wilfred Larner, usually one of the quieter residents of Hell but a man who could swiftly turn from a reasonably controlled individual to a raging, savage animal. Larner's case, too, seemed to have had its genesis in those "outside" regions which so fascinated the student nurse.

Thus it happened that in his room above the basement ward Martin Spellman first came into close contact with Larner's file, and from the first he became absorbed with the thing; particularly with those mentions of a certain "Black Book" — a thing called the *Ctfaat Aquadingen* — purported to relate to the raising of water- and ocean-elementals and other "demons" of more obscure origins. Apparently this book was one of the main causes of Larner's rapid mental decline some ten years previously; and, according to the file, its hints, suggestions, and the occasional blatantly blasphemous "revelation" could scarcely be considered safe reading for any man with a delicately balanced mind.

Spellman could hardly be blamed for not recognizing the title: *Ctfaat Aquadingen*, for the book was known only to a scattered handful of men, most of them erudite antiquarians or students of rare and ancient works, some of them students of darker things: the occult sciences! Indeed, only five copies of the work in various forms existed in the whole world at that time; one in the private library of a London collector; one under lock and key — along with the *Necronomicon*, the *G'harne Fragments*, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, the *Liber Ivonis*, the dread *Cultes des Goules*, and the *Revelations of Glaaki* — in the British Museum, and two of the others in even more obscure and inaccessible places. The fifth copy: that one was soon to fall into Spellman's unwitting hands.

But this book aside, during his decline and before his sister committed him to the institute's care, Larner had also assembled something of a Fortean collection of cuttings from newspapers all over the world; cuttings which, especially if considered as from the often narrow viewpoint of a disordered psyche, might take on all sorts of disturbing aspects.

Spellman wondered just where the institute had gained its often detailed information regarding the events leading to Larner's confinement; and in this he was lucky, for enquiries with Dr. Welford the next morning led him to discover that Larner's sister had placed *all* documents relevant to her brother's derangement in the hands of the institute's alienists. Both Larner's cuttings-file and his "*Ctfaat Aquadingen*" (a great sheaf of stapled foolscap pages in Larner's own handwriting; presumably copied from some other work) were still safely stored in a cupboard in Oakdeene's spacious administrative offices — and Dr. Welford was

not adverse to the idea of placing them, for a few days at least, at Spellman's disposal.

Of the great manuscript in Larner's hand the student could make very little; there were too many inconsistencies in its strange contents — odd juxtapositions in sentence-structure and so on — that seemed to point to its being a translation from some other language, possibly German, and done by a man none too well versed in the tongue, perhaps Larner himself. On the other hand, Larner could have copied his work from some other translated version; and then again, it was just possible that the entire work was his own, but that seemed hardly likely. There were lurid descriptions of rites — hideous “magical” ceremonies involving human and animal sacrifices — which, even suffering as they did through poor translation, were more than sufficient to convince the student nurse that the study of this work had indeed gone far to helping Larner on his way to the institute's basement ward. Having a very well balanced mind himself, and therefore seeing no point in wading through three or four hundred pages of such material, Spellman passed quickly on to the cuttings-file.

Now this was something one could get one's teeth into; and what a bonus for Spellman's book! Why, the cuttings-file was crammed full of stuff he was sure he could use. There were cuttings from sources scattered throughout the globe, from London, Edinburgh, and Dublin; from the Americas, Haiti, and Africa; from France, India, and Malta; from the Troodos Mountains of Cyprus, the Australian Outback, and the Teutoburger Wald in West Germany; and the great majority of them involved the actions of persons — both singularly and in groups or “cults” — allegedly influenced by alien or “outside” forces!

They covered a period from early February 1925 to mid-1926 — detailing cases of panic, mania, and weird eccentricity — and as Spellman read he quickly spotted connecting links in what at first had seemed dissociated stories. Two columns of the *News of the World* had been given over to coverage of the case of the man who uttered a hideous cry before leaping from a fourth-storey window to his death. His room showed proof on investigation that the suicide had been involved with some sort of magical rite; a pentacle had been chalked on the floor and the walls were painted with a crude representation of the blasphemous *Nyhargo Code*. In Africa missionary outposts had reported ominous mutterings from little known desert and jungle tribes, and it was shown in one cutting how human sacrifices had been made to an earth-elemental called Shudmell. Spellman was quick to tie this report in with the fantastic and still unexplained disappearance of Sir Amery Wendy-Smith and his nephew in Yorkshire in 1933; they, too, had seemed obsessed by the conviction that they were doomed to death at the devices of a similar “deity,” one Shudde-M’ell, “of gigantic, rubbery, snakelike, and tentacled appearance.” In California an entire theosophist colony donned white robes for a “glorious fulfillment” that never arrived, and in Northern Ireland white-robed youths sacked and burned three churches in outlying districts to make way for “the Temples of a Greater Lord.” In the Philippines American officers had found certain tribes extremely bothersome throughout the entire period, and in Australia sixty percent of Aboriginal settlements had shut themselves off completely from contact with whites. Secret cults and societies all over the world had brought themselves into the open for the first time, admitting allegiance to various gods and forces and declaring that the vision of their

faiths, an "ultimate resurrection," was about to take place. Troubles in insane asylums were legion, and Spellman wondered at the stoicism of medical fraternities that they had not noted the parallelisms or drawn anything other than the most mundane conclusions.

On the first night of his serious study of the file, Spellman did not get to his bed until very late, leaving it at a correspondingly late hour in the morning. This was a rare indulgence for him; indeed, feeling somehow lethargic the whole day, he did not bother to study or even to work on his book. That evening, when the time came around for his late shift, he still felt sleepy and dull, and it was only then that he discovered he had been detailed once more for the abhorrent lower wards and Hell. Again Barstowe shared the night shift with the student nurse, and Spellman guessed that before midnight the froggish man would come down to make his usual offer.

At eleven he was in the basement ward, beginning his first hurried tour of the morbid place, when he was startled to hear his name called from the small barred spy-hole in the door of the second cell on the left. This was Larner's cell, and apparently the man was in one of his more lucid states. This suited the student very well, for he had intended to talk to Larner at the first opportunity. Now he saw he had his chance.

"How are you, Larner?" he carefully enquired, moving over to peer at the white face framed in the tiny square spy-hole. "You certainly seem in good spirits."

"I am, I am — and I trust you'll help me stay that way. . . ."

"Oh? And how might I be of service?"

"Tell me," Larner secretively asked, "who is on duty with you tonight?"

"Nurse Barstowe," Spellman answered. "Why do you ask?"

But Larner had scurried back away from the door on hearing Barstowe's name spoken, so that Spellman had to peer in through the spy-hole to see him.

"What's wrong, Larner? Don't you get on with Barstowe, then?"

"Larner is a trouble-maker, Spellman — didn't you know?" Barstowe's guttural, strangely menacing voice came suddenly from close behind. Spellman jumped, startled by the unexpected sound, turning to face the squat nurse who must have crept up on him quiet as a mouse. "And anyway —" the ugly man continued, "since when is it your practice to discuss senior personnel with the inmates? Very odd behavior, that, Spellman."

But the student was not a man to be easily intimidated, and the instinctive fear Barstowe's appearance had aroused in him quickly turned to anger when he heard the veiled threat in the older man's question. "You're out of bounds, Barstowe —" he harshly answered, "— and what do you mean by sneaking about down here? If you're thinking of changing duties with me you can forget it — I don't like the way these people behave when you're on duty!" Spellman made his oblique accusation and watched Barstowe's reaction.

The fully-trained nurse had gone gray on hearing Spellman "tick him off," and he was plainly at a loss as to how to answer. When he did speak he had dropped his "Spellman" attitude: "I — I — what are you getting at, Martin? Why! I only came down here to do you a service. I'm not blind, you know. It's plain you don't *like* it down here. But you've done yourself now, Martin. I won't be offering to help you out again — you can bet your life on that."

“That suits me fine, Barstowe — but hadn’t you better be getting back upstairs? By now half the inmates could be out running about the grounds — or are they too afraid of that stick of yours to try it?” Barstowe’s gray color took on an even lighter shade, and beneath the folds of his smock his right hand jerked involuntarily at mention of his stick. “Got it with you, have you?” Spellman pointedly stared at the tell-tale bulge in the froggish man’s clinical attire. “I shouldn’t have bothered if I were you. You won’t be needing it tonight — not down here at any rate.”

At that Barstowe seemed to shrink into himself, the color leaving his face completely, and he turned without another word and almost ran along the corridor and up the stone steps. For the first time, as the squat nurse hurriedly climbed those steps, Spellman noticed that all the spy-holes in the doors lining the corridor were occupied. Faces — in various stages of agitation or animation — with eyes all fixed on the retreating figure of the ugly man, were framed in those tiny barred openings. And Spellman shuddered at the positive *hatred* those mad faces and eyes reflected.

On his next visit to Hell one hour later, Martin Spellman tried to talk to the basement ward’s three or four occasionally articulate inmates; to no avail. Even Lerner would have nothing to do with him. And yet the student nurse seemed somehow to detect an air of satisfaction; a peculiar feeling of *security* flowed out quite tangibly from behind those locked doors and padded walls. . . .

For at least a week after the incident with Barstowe, Spellman felt tempted to mention the man’s odd ways to Dr. Welford; and yet he did not wish to cause Barstowe any real harm. After all, he had no genuine proof that the man was not carrying out his duties

in anything other than a proper manner, and the fact that he carried a stick with him whenever he visited the basement ward could hardly be called conclusive evidence of any unprofessional intent; there was no way at all in which Barstowe could put his weapon to any use. It seemed purely and simply that the man was a rather nasty coward and nothing more — someone to be avoided and ignored, certainly, but not really worth bothering oneself about.

Beside, things were bad at that time; Spellman did not want a jobless Barstowe on his conscience. He did ask one or two discreet questions of the other nurses, however, and while it appeared that none of them particularly cared much for Barstowe, it was likewise evident that no one considered him especially evil or even a bad nurse. And so Spellman dismissed the matter. . . .

Towards the end of November Spellman first heard the news of Barstowe's projected move into "living-in" quarters; apparently the landlady with whom the squat man lodged was expecting her son home from abroad and needed Barstowe's room. Only a few days later the unpleasant possibility became reality when the oddly offensive nurse did indeed move into one of the four ground-floor flatlets; and he had hardly settled in when, at the very end of the month, the first hint of the horror came to Oakdeene.

It happened in the small hours of the morning following one of those rare evenings when, unable to endure his surroundings for another night without a break of some sort, Martin Spellman had allowed himself to be persuaded by Harold Moody to go down into Oakdeene village for a drink. Martin was not a drinking man and his limit was usually only three or four beers, but that night

he felt "in the mood," and the result was that when he and Moody got back to the sanatorium just before midnight he was more than amply prepared for his bed.

It was, too, the beer that saved Martin Spellman from possible involvement when the horror came, for at any other time the hideous screams and demented shrieks from the basement ward would most certainly have shocked him from sleep. As it was, he missed all the "excitement," as Harold Moody had it the next morning when he went into the student's room to shake him awake.

The "excitement" was that four hours earlier, at about three in the morning, one of Hell's worst inhabitants had died after throwing a particularly horrible fit. During his attack the man, one Gordon Merritt, a hopeless lunatic for twenty years, had somehow contrived to gouge out one of his own eyes!

It was only later that Spellman thought to enquire which of the nurses had been unfortunate enough to be on duty when Merritt took his last, fatal fit; and an almost subconscious tremor of strange apprehension went through him when he was told that it had been Barstowe!

For the two weeks following Merritt's death Barstowe kept very much to himself; much more than ever before, and he had never been much of a mixer. In fact, had he not known better, Spellman might never have suspected that Barstowe was "living-in" at all. The truth was that the directors of Oakdeene had been far from happy at the enquiry, and it was thought that the squat nurse had been given a sound dressing down — something about his responses to the situation on the night of the incident being inefficient and altogether too slow. The general belief seemed to

be that Merritt's seizure might well have been avoided if Barstowe had been a bit "quicker off the mark". . . .

On the 13th December Spellman again found himself on night-duty, and once more it was his hourly lot to have to patrol the ward called Hell. Until that time he had never realized that there existed in his subconscious the slightest intention of trying to discover more details of the facts surrounding Merritt's death — he only knew that *something* had been bothering him for far too long and that there were certain things he would like to know — and yet, on his first visit to the basement ward, he went straight to Larner's cell and called the man to the spy-hole.

The cells were constructed in such a way as to make every interior corner visible from those small, barred windows; that is to say that each cell was wedge-shaped, with the "sharp" end of the wedge formed by the door itself. Larner had been lying on his bed at the far end of the cell staring silently at the ceiling when Spellman called out to him, but he quickly got up and went to the door on identifying his caller.

"Larner," Spellman quietly questioned as soon as the other had greeted him, "— what happened to Merritt? Was it — was it the way they say, or —? Tell me what happened, will you?"

"Nurse Spellman, would you do me a great favor?" Larner apparently had not heard the student's question — or perhaps, Spellman thought, he had simply chosen to ignore it!

"A favor? If I can, Larner — what is it you want me to do?"

"There is a matter of *justice* to be attended to!" the lunatic suddenly blurted out, so suddenly, with such urgency — with something so very akin to fervor in his voice — that the young nurse took a quick step back from the cell door.

"Justice, Larner? Whatever do you mean?"

“Justice, yes!” The man peered out at Spellman through the bars, blinking rapidly, nervously as he spoke. And then, in the manner of certain lunatics, he abruptly changed the subject. “Dr. Welford has mentioned how you find the *Cthaat Aquadingen* of interest. I, too, once found it a very interesting work — but for a long time now the book has not been available to me. I suppose they believe its contents to be . . . well, ‘not in my best interests.’ Perhaps they’re right, I’m not sure. It’s true that the *Cthaat Aquadingen* put me in here. Oh, that’s true — quite definitely — yes, that’s why I’m here. I read the Sixth Sathlatta far too often, you see? I almost broke down the barrier completely. I mean, it’s all very well to see Yibb-Tstill in dreams — you can stand that much at least — *but to have him breaking through the barrier!* . . . Ah! There’s a monstrous thought. To have him breaking through — *uncontrolled!*”

As Larner spoke, something he said rang a bell in the student’s mind. Spellman had glimpsed in his brief scanning of the contents of the madman’s book a passage or two containing certain chants or invocations, the Sathlatta, and he made a mental note that later he must go back to that strange volume and discover whatever he could of them . . . and also of this — creature? — Yibb-Tstill.

But then, speaking again, Larner broke into his thoughts; and again the lunatic’s expression had changed, his eyes being wide and steady now in his white face. “Well, nurse Spellman, would it be possible for you to — to do me a little harmless service?”

“You’ll have to say what it is first.”

“Quite simply — I’d like you to make me a copy of the Sixth Sathlatta from the *Cthaat Aquadingen*, and bring it to me. No harm in that, is there?”

Spellman frowned: "But haven't you just this moment blamed your being here on that very book?"

"Ah!" Larner made to explain. "But then I didn't know what I was doing. It's different now — except I can't remember how the thing goes: the Sixth Sathlatta, I mean. It's been almost ten years. . . ."

"Well, I really don't know," Spellman carefully considered. "But see here, Larner, favors work two ways, you know? You still haven't answered *my* question. I might be able to do as you ask, but are you willing to tell me what happened the night Merritt died?"

Larner's eyes, however, had gone furtive, nervous again. He turned his face away. "We'll handle it ourselves, Spellman, no matter the price," he muttered. Then he glanced sharply back at the face of the student framed in the barred window, and again Spellman was amazed at the mercurial property of the man's character. Now his eyes were penetrating, almost sane. "Nothing happened. Merritt took a fit, that's all. He was a mad-man — you know?" Again Larner turned away, this time to walk over to his bed and lie down in his former position.

Spellman, knowing that their "chat" was over, continued slowly down the stark corridor, peering in at the barred spy-holes as he went.

The remainder of that night, despite the fact that he knew all was in order, Martin Spellman could not rid his subconscious of distant alarm bells, and as he walked the nighted halls he found himself occasionally glancing nervously over his shoulder.

Spellman had the next weekend free of duty, and he used his Saturday to track down Larner's strange references in the *Cthaat*

Aquadingen. He eventually found a decidedly alien-looking — chant? — hidden away in one of the manuscript's four coded sections under the legible heading "Sixth Sathlatta." Almost without knowing, he copied the weirdly jumbled letters down onto a sheet of paper, attempting a tongue-twisting pronunciation as he did so:

"*Ghe 'phnglui, mglw 'ngh ghee-yh, Yibb-Tstll,*
Fhtagn mglw y 'tlette ngh 'wgah, Yibb-Tstll,
Ghe 'phnglui mglw-ngh abkobhg 'shg, Yibb Tstll;
THABAITE! — YIBB-TSTLL, YIBB-TSTLL, YIBB-TSTLL!"

Then, before searching for further references to Yibb-Tstll, the young nurse spent a few more minutes vainly trying to make something of what he had written down. Finally he gave up the hopeless task, moving on eventually to find the notes he sought — crowded marginalia apparently deciphered from the coded pages, so-called methods of evocation — in another of the book's sections. To clarify the "message" of these notes, and to make of them something of a readable passage, again, as with the Sixth Sathlatta, he neatly copied the words down onto paper:

(1) TO CALL THE BLACK:

This method involves a wafer, of (flour?) and water composition — printed with the Sixth Sathlatta in the *original* symbols — handed to the victim with the summoning chant (*Necronomicon*, p. 224, under heading *Hoy-Dhin*) called out aloud within the said victim's hearing. This will not produce Yibb-Tstll but his Black Blood, which has the property of being able to live apart from Him; called from a universe so alien that it is known only to Yibb-Tstll and

Yog-Sothoth, conterminous with all spaces and times. The victim is taken when the Black Blood settles like a mantle about him and smothers him. Then the juice of Yibb-Tstll returns with the soul of the victim to the body of The Drowner in His own continuum. . . .

(2) TO SEE YIBB-TSTLL IN DREAMS:

. . . & the Sixth Sathlatta may be used . . . that one might scry in Dreams the Form of The Drowner, Yibb-Tstll, who walks in all Times & Spaces. It must however be observed that the Chant should be used sparingly — *once only* — before each Sleep wherein the Scrying is to be done, lest the Seer impart into That on which he gazes a Perception of the Gate of his Mind; & that, in using this Gate to enter from Outside, & in returning thither through this same Gate, Yibb-Tstll may *burn out* the Mind & Gate & all in His coming & going . . . for the Agony is great & Death certain. Nor, in such a visitation, would His Actions in this Sphere be controlled; & The Drowner's Appetite was well known to the Adepts of old. . . .

(3) TO CALL YIBB-TSTLL:

This method again involves the use of the Sixth Sathlatta: called out three times by thirteen adepts in unison at midnight of any First Day. Note: *any* thirteen callers will find the ritual as described answered, provided at least one amongst them is an adept; but unless at least *seven* of the callers are adepts — and unless, on the night before the midnight of the calling, they first seal their souls with the Naach-Tith Barrier — they may well suffer hideous reversals and penalties!

There was a note here in red ink, added by Larner to the foregoing marginalia: "*Must try to find the remainder of the words*

to raise the barrier of Naach-Tith. . . .'' Obviously, Spellman thought, at the time the man in the ward called Hell had written that last cryptic note, he had already been well along the strange paths of insanity.

For the rest of the afternoon Spellman left the pages of his rapidly shaping manuscript alone and turned to his studies, only making a break for a meal at about six and returning to his textbooks immediately after. At eight he brewed a pot of coffee, which, rather than giving him a lift, seemed to make him somewhat weary so that he lay down on his bed for a few minutes. He had been more tired than he thought, however, waking up cramped and chilly some three hours later when a nightmare — the nature of which he could not remember — shocked him from his sleep.

He turned on his gas fire then, brewing another cup of coffee before taking out his manuscript to make a few small alterations and further notes. He worked solidly until two in the morning, only undressing and climbing into bed when he was satisfied that the current chapter of his book was going well. But before sleeping he took up the loose sheets of paper bearing those notes copied earlier from the *Ctfaat Aquadingen*.

Again, out loud, he commenced to attempt a pronounciation of that weird jumble of letters entitled the Sixth Sathlatta, fancying that his low utterances this time sounded more nearly like they should. But before reaching the end of the second line, when he felt a strange dread welling up inside him, he paused. An involuntary shudder ran the length of his spine.

What was it he had read of this so-called "invocation"? Yes, there it was, just as he had copied it down: "... & the Sixth Sathlatta may be used . . . that one might scry in Dreams the

Form of The Drowner, Yibb-Tstll, who walks in all Times & Spaces.’’

An odd dizziness seemed to come over him and he shook his head to clear it; but though this steadied him somewhat, nonetheless he put away his papers and settled himself down in bed. Something was wrong with his nerves, that was plain. It must be this place and its inmates. He would have to get himself down into Oakdeene village more often with Harold Moody.

Again Spellman dropped quickly off to sleep, and once more his dreams were of a nightmarish nature. . . .

There were weird scenes of alien herbage and evil looking monochrome flowers. Jungles of darkly exotic ferns stretched writhing fronds toward starless, dark green skies through which fantastic birds slid on veined and pulsating wings. There was a clearing close by in the hellish tangle of unknown growths, towards which Spellman's subconscious spirit seemed drawn in some inexplicable fashion. Fungoid shrubs drew back from him as he moved toward the clearing, and huge insects buzzed evilly as they burst from the bells of poisonous-looking blooms at his approach. He realized that he was the alien in this monstrous dimension of dream, and that the reluctance of its denizens was such as his own might be were the roles reversed.

Soon he reached the clearing, a great scabrous area of bleached and sterile earth stretching for at least a mile before the jungle took up again on the other side. In the center of this hideous expanse The Thing stood, and at that distance Spellman judged It to be at least three times as tall as a man. As he drew closer across the crumbling and scabby ground he saw that The Thing was turning, slowly turning about on feet hidden from his view by a great green cloak, a cloak that bulged and jerked and writhed as it

fell from just beneath the — head? — to the corroded and powdery surface on which It stood. Drawing still closer, the dream Spellman felt a scream welling in his throat as the great figure turned towards him and he saw the face clearly for the first time. Had the terrible shape not gone on turning — had those eyes noticed him for a single moment — Martin Spellman knew he must shriek out loud; but no, The Thing in Green continued Its apparently aimless turning, and Its voluminous cloak was alive with uncanny motion. . . .

When Spellman was very close to the giant, no more than a score of paces away, his movement towards It ceased. The Thing had still been turning away from him, but, as he came to a halt, Its motion also faltered.

Then The Thing stopped turning altogether!

For a moment the scene seemed frozen, the only movement being the fantastic billowing of the green cloak, then, slowly but inexorably, the monstrous form began to turn back towards the paralyzed dreamer.

Soon the great figure halted again, facing squarely in Spellman's direction, and he screamed voicelessly as the blasphemous cloak billowed out more violently than ever, parting to permit the dreamer one mad glimpse beneath its green folds. There, about the pulsating black body of the Ancient One, hugely winged reptilian creatures without faces cluttered and clutched at a multitude of blackly writhing, pendulous breasts!

This much Martin Spellman saw —

— And the next thing he knew was that he was being roughly shaken and slapped awake!

Harold Moody, pleasantly drunk, having just returned on foot from Oakdeene village, had "dropped in" to see if Martin fancied

a brew of coffee; he knew that Martin often worked quite late. But he had found his young friend in the throes of nightmare. Never was a man — half inebriated or not and despite the hour — more welcome than Harold Moody; for, even realizing now that he had only been dreaming, Spellman sat and shivered uncontrollably on his bed while his late visitor brewed hot coffee. He could remember his nightmare clearly, and what he remembered was quite the most hellish thing he had ever known.

The monstrous dream-jungle had been bad enough . . . and the blossom-bloated insects . . . and the clearing of dead and crumbling earth. Worse still had been the membranous, blind, winged creatures beneath the sickening green cloak of the giant. But worst of all had been the eyes in the head of that slowly turning colossus. . . .

The next morning, despite an odd listlessness against which he had to fight very hard, Spellman set himself to the long task of searching diligently through the *Ctbaat Aquadingen*. The dream of the previous night had been so *real* — and yet for his life he could not remember having seen in Larner's "Black Book" a description of anything remotely like the nightmare vision he had experienced. Even in broad daylight, with the weak December sun shining in through his window facing the exercise yard, Spellman shuddered as he recalled The Thing of his dream. Other than Ernst Kant's description of "a thing with black breasts and an anus within its forehead" — not from the *Ctbaat Aquadingen* but a comparatively modern work on singular foreign mental cases, similar to the book Spellman was trying to write — there was nothing. From where, then, had his subconscious conjured up the monster of the dream?

Spellman realized that he must after all have a mind far more open to suggestion than he would ever have formerly believed. He had, of course, dreamed of The Thing after reading of the supposed method of "scrying Yibb-Tstll in Dreams." Ridiculous though it all was, the idea had strongly influenced his subconscious, and the nightmare had been the result. . . .

For the next ten days and through Christmas, Spellman's time was taken up in the main with matters far less to his liking than the work he had thus far been doing. In short, while he was free most nights, his day-duties included being instructed in methods of keeping the more dangerous inmates "neat and tidy." He had to learn how to feed and bathe violent patients, and how to clean out the cells of those disposed to animal-like habits. He was glad when the lessons had passed, when he could settle once more to his old routine.

It was the 27th December before Spellman found himself on night duty again, and as the fates would have it his name appeared on the roster opposite that especially offensive duty: the lower wards, and particularly the one called Hell.

That night, on his very first visit to Hell, Spellman found Larner waiting for him at the spy-hole of his cell.

"Nurse Spellman — at last, it's you! Did you . . . did you . . . ?" Eagerly he peered out through the bars.

"Did I what, Larner?"

"I asked you to copy down the Sixth Sathlatta — from the *Cthaat Aquadingen*. Did you forget?"

"No, I didn't forget, Larner," — though in fact, he had — "but tell me — what do you intend to do with . . . with the, er, Sixth Sathlatta?"

“Do with it? Why! — it’s — it’s an *experiment*! Yes, that’s it, an experiment. In fact, Nurse Spellman, you might like to help us out with it?”

“Us, Larner?”

“Me — I meant me — you might like to help *me* with it!”

“In what way?” Spellman found himself interested, and despite the circumstances he was impressed with the lunatic’s apparent lucidity.

“I’ll let you know later — but you’ll have to let me have the Sixth Sathlatta soon — and a few sheets of paper and a pencil. . . .”

“A pencil, Larner?” Spellman frowned suspiciously. “You know I can’t give you a pencil.”

“A crayon, then,” the man in the cell begged in seeming desperation. “Surely I can’t do any harm with a crayon?”

“No, I don’t suppose so. A crayon would be all right, I should think.”

“Good! Then you will ——” The madman let the question hang.

“I can’t promise, Larner — but I’ll think about it.” It would be interesting, though, Spellman told himself, his hideous dream of a fortnight gone dim now in his memory, to see just what Larner would *do* with the Sixth Sathlatta.

“Well, all right — but think quickly!” the man’s voice cut into his thoughts. “I’ll have to have the things I need well before the end of the month. If I don’t — well, the experiment would be no good — not for another year, at any rate.”

Then Larner’s eyes quickly went wide and vacant, his positive expression altering until his features seemed vague and weak. He

turned and walked slowly over to his bed with his hands behind his back.

“I’ll see what I can do for you, Larner,” Spellman spoke to the man’s back. “Probably tonight.” But Larner had apparently lost all interest in their conversation.

It was the same later, when Spellman returned to the basement ward after a quick visit to his room. He spoke to Larner, passing through the bars a crayon, blank paper, and that sheet with the Sixth Sathlatta copied from Larner’s book, but the lunatic sat on his bed and made no attempt to answer. Spellman had to let the articles the man had requested fall to the floor within the cell, and even then Larner showed not the slightest flicker of interest.

Toward morning, however, when the stain of approaching dawn was already making itself known through the snow-laden clouds to the east, the young nurse noticed that Larner was busy writing; working furiously with his crayon and paper, but as before he ignored all of Spellman’s efforts at communication.

It happened two days later that after his mid-morning break Spellman went down to his room for one of his rare cigarettes before beginning his afternoon duties. As he pulled at the cigarette he peered contemplatively out through the bars of his window (Harold Moody had once jovially explained that the bars were not to keep him in — no one doubted *his* sanity — but to keep exercising madmen *out*!) at the dozen inmates of Hell as they walked or shambled up and down the high-walled yard. The very worst of them were shackled at the feet, so that their movements were restricted and much slowed down, but at least half of them knew no physical restrictions whatever — except the

watchful vigilance of their half-dozen white-clad warders.

The latter seemed especially lethargic that day, or so it appeared to the curious observer, for from his vantage point it was plain to him that Larner was up to something. Spellman saw that every time Larner came within speaking distance of another inmate he would say something, and that then his hand would stray suspiciously close to that of the other. It looked for all the world as though he was passing something around. But what? Spellman believed he knew.

He also realized that it was his duty to warn the warders in the yard that something was up — and yet he did not do so. It was quite possible that, should he bring Larner's activities to the attention of the others, he would in the end be causing trouble for himself; for he believed Larner to be passing around copies of the Sixth Sathlatta! Spellman smiled. No doubt the madman intended making an attempt at raising Yibb-Tstill. How the lunatic mind contradicts itself, he thought, turning away from the window. Why! You could hardly call the twelve creatures in the exercise-yard "adepts," now could you? And in any case, Larner was one man short!

At 4:00 P.M. Spellman was required to go down to the yard with five other warders to stand guard over Hell's inmates as they took their second and last exercise of the day. One of the other five was Barstowe, looking extremely nervous and uncomfortable, but he kept well away from the younger man. Spellman had noticed before how when Barstowe was in the exercise-yard the madmen were always exceptionally subdued — and yet now, for the first time, there seemed to be an indefinable attitude of quiet defiance about them — quite as though they had an "ace," as it were, up their collective sleeve. Barstowe had noticed it too, and

his interest picked up when Larner went over to Spellman to talk to him.

“Not long now, Nurse Spellman,” Larner quietly said after exchanging reasonable greetings.

“Oh?” Spellman smiled. “Is that right, Larner? I saw you to-day, you know, passing round those copies you made.”

Larner’s face fell immediately. “You didn’t tell anyone, did you?”

“No, I didn’t tell anyone. When are you going to tell me what it’s all about?”

“Soon, soon — but isn’t it a pity I don’t know the Naach-Tith formula?”

“Er — a pity, yes,” Spellman agreed, wondering what on Earth the fellow was rambling on about now. Then he remembered seeing that mention of a so-called “Naach-Tith Barrier” in Larner’s notes in the *Cthaat Aquadingen*. “Will it spoil the experiment?”

“No, but . . . but it’s *you* I’m really sorry for. . . .”

“Me?” Spellman frowned. “How do you mean, Larner?”

“It’s not for myself, you understand,” the madman quickly went on, “what happens to me can’t much matter in a place like this — and the others are as badly off. Not much hope for them here. Why! Some of them might even benefit from the reversals! But it’s you, Spellman, it’s *you* — and I’m really sorry for that. . . .”

Spellman considered his next question carefully. “Is the — *formula* — is it so important then?” If only he could get through to the man, discover the twisted circles in which his mind moved.

But Larner was suddenly frowning. “You haven’t read the *Cthaat Aquadingen*, have you?” He made the question an accusation.

“Yes, yes of course I have — but it’s very difficult, and I’m no —” Spellman searched for the word: “I’m no *adept!*”

Larner nodded his head, the frown vanishing from his face: “That’s it exactly: you’re no adept. There should be seven but I’m the only one. The Naach-Tith Formula would help, of course, but even then ——” Suddenly Larner caught sight of Barstowe edging closer. “*Lethiktros Themiel, phitrith-te klepthos!*” he instantly muttered under his breath, then turned back to Spellman: “But I don’t know the rest of it, you see, Spellman? And even if I did — it’s not designed to keep *his* sort of evil away. . . .”

The next day, on the one occasion Spellman snatched to watch the inmates of Hell through his barred window, he again noticed the odd camaraderie between them. He also noticed a thin red welt, absent the previous day, on Larner’s face, and wondered how the madman had come by such an injury. On a whim, not knowing exactly just why he did so, he checked the roster to find out who had been on duty the night before. And then he knew it had been no whim at all but a horrible suspicion — for Barstowe had been on duty the previous night, and in his mind’s eye Spellman pictured the squat, ugly nurse with his stick! And the old unease welled up in his heart as he thought again of the welt on Larner’s face, and of that other inmate who had somehow contrived to gouge out one of his own eyes in “a fatal lunatic fit. . . .”

That night, late on New Year’s Eve — after a day of very limited festivities, marred for Spellman by his growing unease — he received what should have been his first definite warning of the

horror soon to come. As it happened he paid little attention: he was off duty and working on his book, but after all the shouting had died down in the ward beneath, Harold Moody, on duty, came to his room to tell him about it.

"Never saw anything like *that* before!" he told Spellman after settling himself nervously on the younger man's bed. "Did you hear it?"

"I heard some shouting, yes. What was it all about?" Spellman was not really interested; his book was coming well and he wanted to get on with it.

"Eh?" Moody cocked his good ear in his friend's direction. "Shouting, did you say? *Chanting*, more like it — all of 'em together, at the top of their voices, so loud as to almost deafen me completely. Not words, mind you, Martin — at least not recognizable words — but gibberish! Utter gibberish!"

"Gibberish?" Spellman got up immediately, crossing his small room to be closer to the shaken Moody. "What sort of — gibberish?"

"Well, I really don't know. I mean —"

"Was it like this?" Spellman cut him off, taking out the *Cthaat Aquadingen* from his bedside locker and flipping its pages until he found the one he wanted.

*"Gbe'phnglui, mglw'ngb ghee-yh, Yibb-Tstll,
Fhtagn mglw y'tlette ngh'wgah, Yibb-Tstll,
Gbe'phnglui. . . ."*

He stopped abruptly, realizing that he did not *need* to read the thing from the book, that of a sudden it was imprinted indelibly

on his mind! "Did it — did what they were chanting go like — like that?"

"Eh? No, no it was different from that — harsher syllables — not so guttural. And that Larner chap — my God, he's a real case, that one! Kept ranting on about 'not knowing the ending'!"

Moody got up to go. "Anyhow, it's all over now ——"

As Moody reached the door Spellman's alarm clock began to clamor. The young nurse had set the mechanism to go off at midnight, simply so that he would know when to welcome in the New Year. Now he remembered and said: "Happy New Year, Harold!" Then, as his friend answered in kind and closed the door behind him, he again took up the *Ctfaat Aquadingen*.

New Year's Eve — the night before the First Day of the year! So, Spellman silently mused, Larner had attempted to build the "Barrier of Naach-Tith" — but of course, he had not known all of the words. Spellman pondered, too, the odd fact that he was able to remember, without any effort worth mentioning, the Sixth Sathlatta; and that the weird consonants of those diseased lines seemed somehow clearer in his mind and on his tongue.

Well, all right — given that he had allowed himself a folly or two with Larner, that was over now — it was time the madman's weird experiment came to an end. But for his foolish pandering to the lunatic's crazed fancies the disturbance in the ward known as Hell would not have happened. And what of tomorrow night? In another twenty-four hours, would the inmates of Hell use the thrice-repeated Sixth Sathlatta in an attempt to call forth the dread Yibb-Tstll? Spellman thought so, and (damn the cunning of the lunatic mind), Larner had attempted to draw him into the — coven?

Not that Spellman believed for a single moment that any sort of harm, supernatural or other, could come from the concerted mouthings of madmen; but a repeat performance of this night's disturbance might well alert the sanatorium's hierarchy to his decidedly illegal dealings with Larner. He would then certainly find himself in some sort of trouble, if not actual hot water, and he did not want to damage the atmosphere between himself, Dr. Welford, and one or two others of his superiors. He was on duty in the upper wards in the morning, finishing at 4:00 P.M., but before he finished he would find a way to get down to see Larner. Perhaps a gentle word with the lunatic would do the trick.

In his bed before sleeping, Spellman thought again on his puzzling ability to recall in detail the chaotic Sixth Sathlatta, and no sooner had he pictured the thing in his mind than it was on his lips. Amazed at his unsuspected fluency he whispered the words through in the darkness of his room, and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep.

— *He was back in the alien forest beneath dark-green, weirdly populated skies. Again, far stronger than before, his dream-spirit felt the pull of The Thing in the scabrous clearing: Yibb-Tstll, huge and potent, turning inexorably, almost stupidly about His own axis, with His cloak billowing monstrously as the night-gaunts beneath its folds flapped and clung in blind horror to the black and writhing multiple breasts.*

This time, as soon as Spellman drifted (his dream-motion was as eerie as the drift of weeds in some outré Sargasso morass) into the crumble-earthed clearing, the vast obscenity at its center stopped Its turning, and as he wafted closer he saw Its eyes full upon him. . . .

The utter horror of the occurrence which followed as he drew

closer to the loathsome Ancient One shocked Martin Spellman from his sleep, and if anything its simplicity only went toward heightening that horror. The wonder was that Spellman had been able to recognize the — *writhings* — of those hellish features for what they were!

“It smiled — *the Thing smiled at me!*” he screamed, sitting bolt upright and flinging the bedclothes from him. For a long moment he simply sat, staring about wide-eyed in the darkness of his room; then, limbs trembling and with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, he got up and shakily brewed coffee.

Two hours later, at about 4:00 A.M., with dawn still some way off, he managed with some trepidation to get back to sleep. For the remainder of the night his slumbers were mercifully undisturbed. . . .

When Martin Spellman awoke on the morning of New Year’s Day, 1936, he had no time to pause in consideration of the occurrences of the previous night; he had slept late, was on duty soon, and the time was flying by. Spellman was not to know it but that day was to be the most eventful since his arrival at Oakdeene — and at the end of the day. . . .

At ten-thirty in the morning he managed to find a way to get down to the basement ward, and once there in Hell he went straight to Larner’s cell. Through the barred spy-hole he saw that his mission was useless. Larner, frothing at the mouth, was flinging himself in a silent fit from wall to padded wall, his eyes bulging and his teeth bared through the foam of his madness in gnashing frenzy. The student left the ward and found the nurse whose duty it was to attend the lower wards. He made Larner’s silent raging known and then returned to his duties.

Toward the end of the lunch-break, after missing Spellman at the dinner table, Harold Moody found the young nurse prowling worriedly back and forth across the restricted but private floor of his room. Spellman would say nothing of what was on his mind. In fact, he did not himself know what was bothering him, except that he had feelings of an impending — something. Feelings which were somehow relieved a little when Moody delivered his news that Alan Barstowe had quit his job at the sanatorium. No one, it transpired, knew for sure why the squat nurse was throwing up his job; but apparently there had been rumors about his nerves for some time. Moody stated that in his opinion the place and the inmates must have been “getting on top” of the man. . . .

Later, after finishing duty for the day, Spellman — still inordinately pleased at the news of Barstowe’s imminent departure, feeling more himself and easier in his mind by the minute — ate a quick meal before returning to his room and getting out his manuscripts. By nine in the evening, however, discovering that with the encroachment of the dark outside his queasy uneasiness had returned at the expense of his concentration, he put away his book and simply lay on his bed for a while. He spent some time in trying to detect unusual sounds from Hell, finding himself no happier to discover that all seemed very quiet down there. A few minutes later, catching himself beginning to nod, he got up and smoked a cigarette. He did not want to sleep; his aim was to stay awake until midnight, to see if the inhabitants of the basement ward would get up to any more Larner inspired tricks.

By ten a powerful desire had taken hold of Spellman to read through the *Cthaat Aquadingen* again — particularly the Sixth

Sathlatta — and he actually got the book out before managing to fight down the urge. For his life he could not see just what there might be in Larner's "Black Book" to interest him now. He was feeling very tired, though, natural enough considering the disturbances of the previous night, and he had something of a headache coming on. But even following a hastily brewed cup of coffee and an aspirin, Spellman's weariness and the pain behind his temples increased until he was forced to lie on his bed. He glanced at his watch, seeing that it was ten-fifty; and then, before he knew it —

— Someone, somewhere — a well-known voice — was muttering the chaotic words of the Sixth Sathlatta, and even as he fell into a deep sleep Spellman knew that the voice was his own!

He was at the edge of the poisoned clearing again, under dark-green skies and with the evil jungle already behind him; and to his front, in the center of the clearing, Yibb-Tstll waited, turning inexorably as ever on His own axis. Spellman wanted to turn and run, to get away from The Thing that waited in Its great green billowing cloak; and he fought — pitting all the strength of his subconscious mind and will against the awful magnetism radiating from the revolting, revolving monstrosity before him — fought and almost won. . . . But not quite! Slowly, agonizingly slowly, with his sleeping mind squeezed to a tiny ball of concentration, Martin Spellman was pulled forward across the leprous earth. And as he pitted himself against the horror of the Ancient One, he could feel Its anger, could sense the urgency It engendered now in this hideous dream-region's atmosphere.

For what seemed like hours Spellman fought his losing battle, and then Yibb-Tstll — tiring of the game and aware of the shortness of time — tried a different tactic.

While he had yet a good distance to go to the center of the clearing, Spellman saw The Thing stop Its turning; and then, without warning, the horror threw back Its cloak to release the hellish "pets" beneath!

Spellman could only fight one thing at a time, and Yibb-Tstll was not going to allow him to escape this time into wakefulness. Even knowing he was dreaming Spellman was at the mercy of his dream. He screamed voicelessly, lashing out at the flapping, blank-faced, vile-bodied night-gaunts as they buffeted him with skin-and bone wings and tried to shove him off his feet. Finally they won and he fell, cowering down and wrapping his arms about his head as he felt himself swiftly borne forward on his nightmare's ghost-drift. When the noisome activity about him ceased, he fearfully looked up — and found himself at the feet of the colossal Thing in the green cloak!

Again those awful eyes — those red eyes that were not fixed in their places — the eyes that moved quickly, independently — sliding with vile viscosity over the whole rotten surface of Yibb-Tstll's pulpy, glistening head!

Mercifully distracted from the horror before him, he saw suddenly that he was not alone. There were others with him — twelve of them — and even in the dream the features and shapes of some of the twelve were twisted, and some of them slavered and their eyes were strange, making their identities obvious.

Larner! — and the rest of Hell's inmates — a complete coven, now, come to worship at the feet of a lunatic "God," the loathly Yibb-Tstll!

Still kneeling, sickly turning his face away, Spellman saw a book lying open before him on the rotting ground. The Cthaat Aquadingen, Larner's copy, and open at the Sixth Sathlatta!

"No — oh, no!" Spellman screamed voicelessly in sudden understanding. Why? — to what end should this — Thing — be allowed to walk upon Earth?

Larner got down beside him: "You know, in your heart, Nurse Spellman. You know!"

"But —"

"No time," Larner cut off his protest. "Midnight is almost here! You'll join us in The Calling?"

"No, damn you — no!" Spellman cried his mental denial.

"YOU WILL!" answered a booming, alien voice in his head, "NOW!" And Yibb-Tstll reached out from under His cloak a green and black thing that might have been an arm, with a hand and fingers of sorts, pushing the tips into Spellman's mouth and ears and nostrils — deep into his mind — searching and squeezing in certain places. . . .

When the great Ancient One withdrew his slimy fingers Spellman's eyes were very vacant and his mouth, trickling saliva, hung slack. Only then, at midnight — as if at a spoken command though none was given, simultaneously and in perfect unison — did the coven begin the invocation; with Spellman sitting bolt upright in his bed, and with the others below in their cells.

It was early February before the furor at Oakdeene died down, by which time the events of the night of 1st January 1936 had been carefully examined — as best they could be — and chronicled for future reference in various reports. By then, too, Dr. Welford had resigned; he had been unfortunate enough to be Duty Officer of the night in question; and while it was generally recognized that the responsibility had in no way been his, his

resignation seemed to appease directors, newspapers and the relatives of many of the inmates alike.

Certainly, had Dr. Welford been a man without scruple, he might have turned at least part of the result of that night's happenings to his advantage; for in the following month five of Hell's inhabitants — three of them previously "hopeless" maniacs — were released as perfectly responsible citizens! Alas, five others, of which one was Larner, had been found dead in their cells shortly after the midnight disturbance — the victims of "frantic lunatic convulsions." The remaining two — *survived* — but in states of deep and constant catatonia.

Such had been the upheaval at Oakdeene on the morning of the 2nd January, that at first it was believed Barstowe's ghastly death on the lonely road between the sanatorium and Oakdeene village had been brought about by a madman escaped in the confusion. For some reason the squat nurse had not waited until morning to leave — perhaps he had some premonition of the horror to come — but had departed on foot with his case shortly after eleven that very night. Apparently Barstowe had tried to fight back before succumbing to his attacker: a black telescopic stick with a silver tip — an instrument that could be opened out to make a pointed weapon some nine feet long — was found near his body, but his efforts had been of no avail.

As soon as Barstowe's body was discovered, a count of Oakdeene's inmates, living and dead, served to put down any rumors that might have arisen with respect to the institute's security; but certainly the squat nurse *had* suffered some sort of maniacal attack. No sane man, not even any ordinary sort of animal, could have savaged him so and chewed away half his head and brain!

In all, the occurrences of the night of the 1st-2nd January 1936 could have filled a whole chapter in Spellman's book — had he ever finished that book. He did not finish it, nor will he ever. Having suffered a terrible *reversal*, Martin Spellman, now in late middle-age, still occupies the second cell on the left in Hell; and because, even in his more lucid moments, he only babbles and drools and screams, for the most part he is kept under sedation. . . .

The Cleaner Woman

This was William "Spotty" Morton's fifth and final day of watching and listening; tonight he would do the job, and it would be his big one. He had in fact "done" this specific block of offices in the city before, and like all good criminals he had lately returned to the city and the scene of that earlier crime.

Thinking back as he carefully sipped his beer, Spotty recollected the details of that time a year gone when his avarice and natural detestation of physical labor — a condition accumulated over almost twenty years of fairly successful, undetected, if often petty burglary — had led him yet again to employ his talents in a foray against the general good. He shifted now uneasily upon his barstool as the more unpleasant details of that earlier adventure sprang to his mind:

. . . Having studied the intricacies of the office block minutely, he had discovered a massive flaw in its security. Simply this: the cleaner woman had a key to the outer rear door and another to the inner door leading into the office complex proper. Moreover, she was allowed to use these keys as she wished, coming and going whenever she pleased and usually doing her work out of office hours; occasionally late at night, more often early in the morning.

Though it had all seemed beautifully simple, Spotty had discovered over the years that the simplest-seeming objectives are often the most difficult to achieve. And so he had given the problem a little thought.

At first he had considered simply popping the portly, middle-aged widow on the head and taking her keys. This would mean gaining entry to her home (he could do that by knocking on her door salesman-fashion with an excuse to be in; she lived alone not far from her work), but there was always the chance that she might regain consciousness and raise the alarm before he was through. No, his best bet would be to follow her to the office block one night and knock her down there, where he could do his work and keep an eye on her at the same time. This, finally, was the course he had chosen.

Abruptly Spotty recognized the way his train of thought was running and checked it. He'd been over all that in his mind before — far too often. It wasn't good for a bloke's nerves; at least, not in Spotty's line of business. Nonetheless, as he sipped his beer, his mind again picked up that niggling, unforgotten thread of events — “conscience,” you might call it, in an animal of nobler instincts — and without realizing it Spotty drifted back again through some thirteen months of time to that night when —

He had come up to her silently in the dusky evening street, just as she was letting herself in through the rear outer door. Flashing the bright disc of a lapel-badge salvaged from a packet of breakfast cereal, he had introduced himself as “the new security man.” She had answered something like: “I didn't know we had an old one!” — but then, before she had time to think or argue about it, he was in after her with the door shut behind them. He could remember the way the boils on his neck had hurt with the strain when he swung his arm to cosh her. He'd found it necessary to stretch himself to hit her just right. She was a big woman.

And she was strong. That first tap he'd delivered should have kept her out for an hour, but it didn't. Scornfully, having first silently broken into one of the offices, Spotty had just cracked his first safe when he heard her low moans echoing along the downstairs corridor. Although she had managed to sit up, her eyes were closed when he reached her. Just as he was about to gag her, she opened them. She opened her mouth, too!

Her first scream was more a hoarse gurgle, but Spotty had seen those lungs beneath the huge, flaccid breasts expanding for what might have been a real blockbuster. Quick as thought he'd popped her again, right in the center of her head, where the faded brown hair parted. She had gone over like she was poleaxed. Her pulse had been OK, though, if a trifle fluttery. He left her seated there, with her back propped against the corridor wall and her head lolling, and returned to his work.

Spotty had been sweating by that time, sweating and swearing under his breath, cursing his luck that the cleaner woman should be a big fat powerhouse of a bitch instead of some frail little creature who'd faint at the mere sight of him — and *stay* fainted! That second tap he'd given her should do the trick, though. . . .

His absolute astonishment when, half an hour later, as he was busy on the third safe, she staggered in through the forced office door on him, can best be imagined.

Fortunately for Spotty the cleaner woman was too weak by then to yell proper. Barely articulate, she had merely babbled and pointed a fat, shaky, accusing finger that seemed to wriggle like a worm in the beam of light from his pocket-torch. Then ——

“ ‘Ere, guv — haint yer feelin’ too good, then?’ ”

Spotty jerked upright, almost falling off his stool as the

bartender's voice brought him back to the present. His spasmodic jerking caused the ripe boils on the back of his neck to rub against his silk scarf. "It's . . . it's only me boils," he muttered, grimacing. "Gives me 'ell, they does."

He threw the collar of his coat back, lifting his scarf tenderly so that the barman could see the bulging, puffy neck beneath. The purple flesh was festooned with great boils, their extended white nipples visibly pulsing.

"Not in the *bar*, guv!" the man protested, drawing back in disgust. "The customers, yer know. . . ."

"What customers?" Spotty asked, peering pointedly around at the almost empty room.

"Well, yer know —" the barman weakly offered; then: "'Ere, shouldn't yer 'ave 'em seen to?"

"Does no good," Spotty answered, resignedly. "Doctors only lance 'em. 'Urts like 'ell. And they only comes back again whenever —" Whenever he was worrying over the details of a job. Whenever his quickening pulse pushed his body's poisons outward to long-suffering surface pores. "They're always on me bloody neck!" he complained. "'Ere, give us another drink — and 'ave one yerself."

Why not? He'd soon be in the money, wouldn't he? And he'd get all four safes this time; he might even have a look upstairs.

The office block stood just across the street. From where he sat, through the huge glass hanging over the bar, Spotty could keep an alert, observant eye on the place. As he watched the building, his mind projected a mental picture of its layout. There were four major offices on the ground floor, all of them pushovers once you got in. The safes were child's play, combination efforts that

Spotty's near-telepathically delicate ears could almost hear chuckling their secrets to him as he twirled the knurled knobs and felt the tumblers drop.

They hadn't changed the safes, he'd discovered that much, but of course the combinations would all have been altered. That would cause no problem. They had, though, reinforced their security. Alarm systems had not been built into the upstairs windows, too. Well, he'd already taken care of that. Earlier in the day, on the pretext of deciding to take out an insurance policy, Spotty had walked into one of the smaller upstairs offices. Naturally enough, the terms of the projected policy had not suited him. Before leaving he had visited the toilet; there he had prepared the way for tonight.

The electrical wiring for the alarm system passed horizontally through a paneled recess along the wall of the toilets and on round the entire building. Spotty had locked himself into one of the cubicles where, in a matter of minutes, he had unscrewed the cistern from the wall to get at the electrical leads beneath. When he had finished, two tiny wires dangled outside the building above a side street, trapped where he'd lowered the window upon them. Inside, where he'd replaced the cistern, nothing showed of the extra wires. The lip of the cistern fitted neatly over the window-sill. Tonight he would hang a little black box by its terminals upon those protruding wires before opening the window. The alarm system, recircuited, would not operate.

Having by then spent some ten minutes in the cubicle, Spotty used up a few more seconds mentally checking out his arrangements. The electrical paraphernalia aside, he had also prepared himself a means of reaching this first-floor window. Outside, the

rungs of an elevated fire-escape stepped across the wall just below the window. Now a thread of nylon was hanging, looped over one of the rungs. Fifteen feet below, at a height of about seven feet above the pavement, a small wad of chewing gum turned almost invisibly upon twin ends of nylon strand.

As he left the cubicle Spotty hung an "Out of Order" sign, stolen from the city's public toilets, on the doorknob.

Walking out of the building, Spotty had quickly, unobtrusively entered the side street to push the dangling gob of gum firmly into a crack where cement had fallen from between bricks. No one walking along that street, even glancing up in just the right place, would ever notice the twin spiderweb threads hanging from above and disappearing into the crack in the wall.

Thus, in less than half an hour all told, Spotty had completed his preliminaries. The chances now were all in his favor that tonight's raid would be a complete success. The only difficult bit might be when he was climbing up to the fire-escape and then in through the window; a process he reckoned would take about two minutes, including time taken to thread his rope up over the rung on the nylon thread. He would, however, be in the building's shadow; but in any case, it had to be this way, the ground-floor windows were all barred and shuttered.

With this phase of his plan complete and checked out, Spotty had gone out of the side street and directly across the road to stand where he could keep an eye on the doctored window and the wall beneath it. He had stood there until the bar opened, noting with satisfaction that not one of the two dozen or so pedestrians walking beneath his almost invisible device had once glanced in its direction.

Now, as he watched the darkness fall, he sipped his beer and felt the tell-tale throbbing of his boils. In a little less than an hour he would collect his tools before the onslaught. The office block was gray with evening now, grimly challenging somehow; the last of its daily inhabitants were wearily leaving for their various homes. No doubt many of them were already looking forward to tomorrow — payday! — but Spotty's plans all centered upon tonight.

He had picked his time more carefully on this occasion — the pickings would be rich — there would be no . . . interruptions. Last time there had been the cleaner woman. This time, so far as he had been able to ascertain, the new woman only worked days.

Spotty paid for his drinks and left the bar, making his way cold sober through the city in the direction of his temporary lodgings to collect his tools. Walking in the cool evening air, he "switched off," blanking his mind and relaxing as best he could, composing himself. This was always his routine immediately before a job, and his thoughts only returned to the business at hand when he found himself mounting the dingy staircase to his boarding-house room.

Having paid his bill earlier in the day, Spotty had left his suitcase — containing all his worldly goods, bar the necessary tools — at the railway station. When the job was done he would pick up his suitcase, buy a ticket, and catch the one o'clock train for Newcastle — but he'd get off at the very next stop up the line. A taxi ride would take him into Linton, where he'd dismount in a rather select area. Then, when the taxi had left him at "his address," he'd hoof it up the road a bit and catch another taxi into the dead end of town. Again he would dismount at a false address,

and finally he'd walk the last two or three hundred yards to where a girlfriend of his had a flat. Spotty had phoned her earlier to expect him.

Oh, yes, he congratulated himself upon his planning, it would take a lot more than a pack of flat-footed bloodhounds to catch a rare old fox like William "Spotty" Morton!

Less than forty minutes later — with a slender rope wound round his waist beneath his waistcoat, his neat but complex electrical box of tricks and assorted tools swinging from his hand in the form and guise of a slim briefcase — Spotty set out in the darkness for his rendezvous. Behind him he left a room wiped clean of fingerprints, neat as a new pin, with absolutely nothing in it to betray any of the finer details of his short occupancy. His landlady might remember the polite, wiry little man with the moustache and the boils, but while Spotty could do nothing about the latter, the former was easily remedied. He didn't like the moustache anyway, had only grown the thing in the first place as part of his preparations. He stopped off at the first public convenience to remove it, then on to the office block.

It took Spotty less than the two minutes he'd reckoned on to gain entry into the upstairs offices, and not much longer to satisfy himself that the real spoils lay below. Accordingly, he made his way carefully downstairs, along the well-remembered corridor to the door of the first office. It was locked, of course, but provided no real problem for Spotty's expert fingers. Shortly he had penetrated to the inner office where he flashed a careful, exploratory beam of light upon the face of the wall safe. He recognized that face of old, as one recognizes an old friend, and grinned tightly as his thinly-gloved hands fondled the knurled

knob, giving it a few preliminary twirls while his faculties attuned themselves to the conditions of the task in hand.

As the minutes passed, all of Spotty's concentration centered upon the job, his fingertips becoming uncannily aware, as the combination knob spun left and right and one by one the tumblers fell; until, with a low grunt of triumph, he threw down the handle of the safe and pulled its heavy door open.

— And at that precise moment he heard a low moan echoing down the nighted corridor behind him!

The safe and its contents were instantly forgotten; Spotty moved silently to the outer office door and gradually eased his head out until he could peer along the corridor's clinically vacuous length.

Nothing! No single thing stirred in that corridor; the glass-paned doors to the offices on both sides glowed with that faint sheen of glass at night; a distant street lamp sent a patch of light to fall at the far end of the passage, illuminating the outer rear door — but nothing moved. It had been the wind, then, the wind coming up outside and moaning in the ventilation shafts.

Spotty's hair lay down again on his head, the throbbing of his boils subsided to an almost bearable pulsing and he began to breathe more normally. God! But that moan had sounded so human! And to hear such a sound in such a place at *such* a time. . . .

Spotty peered along the corridor at that so well-remembered rear door once more before shakily returning to his work. It was probably his imagination, he reckoned, and not the wind at all. He had after all heard moans echoing along that corridor once before. . . .

About half an hour later, with his zip-fronted waistcoat stuffed full of bank notes, Spotty was on the verge of cracking the safe in the second office when he heard a sound that froze him in his tracks as perfectly as any Gorgon's kiss. It was simply this: the *scuff, scuff, scuff* of a brush, and the attendant clatter of a dustpan!

This time there could be no doubt about it — someone was in the building with him — in all probability the cleaner he'd mistakenly believed to work only during the day. Of all the lousy luck! Spotty unfroze, took out his cosh, pocketed his torch, and crept to the office door where, as before, he cautiously peered out into the dark corridor.

He was right, perfectly right, for there in the darkness, silhouetted against the previously noted patch of light, a black figure moved industriously on hands and knees to the accompanying swish of a hand brush and the clatter of a dustpan. It was a woman, with a sort of semiluminous nimbus about her head, and she was making her way slowly but surely down the corridor toward the open door where Spotty now crouched. He, too, was down on all fours, making himself small as possible and —

— Icy fingers suddenly ran the tightrope of Spotty's spine. This silhouette, with its huge and pendulous breasts — this cleaner woman, so quiet apart from the whisperings and clinkings of her work — this woman who looked so much bigger in the dark than when he had spied upon her in daylight — *how in God's name could she see in the dark?*

Still on all fours, Spotty began to back hurriedly away into the dark office, and as he did so his foot kicked an empty wastepaper bin —

For a moment, following the loud clang of this nerve-wrenching betrayal, there was complete silence, and unable to bear the suspense of *not knowing* Spotty stretched out his neck again to peer once more down the dark throat of the corridor. The silhouette was upright now, its head inclined, as if listening intently, in Spotty's direction.

And suddenly he knew. He *knew*, and yet could not, dared not believe. With almost nerveless fingers he pulled out his torch, and as the silhouette expanded suddenly, monstrously, to rush in screaming silence down the corridor upon him, he flashed a beam of light full in its face ——

A huge face red with blood and fury — luminous with corruption — *the face of the woman he had murdered here a year ago!*

The next morning when the offices were opened for the day's business, the place was found as usual in extremely tidy order; a fact which invariably astonished the daily cleaner (for she rarely earned her money), though of course she had never complained about it. Extremely tidy order indeed, all in all — except for the wastepaper bins.

The bins were *untidy*. . . . They were downright untidy — to say nothing of revolting. For most of them were full. They were full of William "Spotty" Morton, boils and all.

The Statement of Henry Worthy

I

Difficult as it is to find a way in which to tell the truth of the hideous affair, I know that if I am to avoid later implication in the events leading up to and relevant to the disappearance of my poor nephew, Matthew Worthy, it is imperative that the tale be told. And yet. . . .

The very nature of that alien and foulest of afflictions which contaminated Matthew is sufficient, merely thinking back on it in the light of what I know now, to cause me to look over my shoulder in apprehension and to shudder in an involuntary spasm — this in spite of the fact that it is far from chilly here in my study, and despite the effects of the large draft of whisky I have just taken, a habit rapidly grown on me over the last few days.

Better, I suppose, to start at the very beginning, at that time in early July of this Year of Our Lord, 1931, when Matthew came down from Edinburgh to visit. He was a fine young man: tall, with a strong, straight back and a good, wide-browed, handsome face. He had a shock of jet hair which took him straight to the hearts of the more eligible young ladies of Eeley-on-the-Moor, and of the neighboring village of High-Marske, which also fell within the boundaries of my practice; but strangely, at only twenty-one years of age, Matthew had little interest in the young women of the two villages. His stay, he calculated, would be too

short to acquire any but the remotest of friendships; he was far too busy with his studies to allow himself to be anything but mildly interested in the opposite sex.

Indeed, Matthew's professors had written to inform me of the brilliance of their pupil, predicting a great future for him. In the words of one of these learned gentlemen: "It is more apparent every day, from the intensity of his studies, the freshness with which he views every aspect of his work, and the hitherto untried methods which he employs in many of his tasks and experiments, that the day will come when he will be — for he surely has the potential — one of the greatest scientists in his field in the country and perhaps the whole world. Already he emulates many of the great men who, not so very long ago, were his idols, and the time draws ever nearer when he will have the capacity to exceed even the greatest of them."

And now Matthew is gone. I do not say "dead" — no, he is, as I myself may well soon be, *departed*. . . . And yet it is my hope that I might still be able to release him from the hell which at present is his prison.

When Matthew came down to Yorkshire it was not without a purpose. He had read of how, twenty-five years ago, the German genius Horst Graumer found two completely unknown botanical specimens on the moors. This was shortly before that fatal ramble from which Graumer never returned. Since the German's disappearance — despite frequent visits to the moors by various scientific bodies — no further evidence of the *Graumer Specimens* had been found. Now that the original plants, at the University of Cologne, were nothing more than mummified fragments, in spite of all precautions taken to preserve them, Matthew had decided

that it was time someone else explored the moors. For unless they had been faked, the *Graumer Specimens* were unique in botany, and before his disappearance Graumer himself had described them as being “sehr sonderbare, mysteriöse Unkräuter!” — very strange and mysterious weeds. . . .

So it was that shortly before noon on the seventh day of July Matthew set out over the moors, taking with him a rucksack, some food, and a rope. The latter was to ensure, in the event of his finding what he sought on some steep incline, that he would experience no difficulty in collecting specimens. With the fall of night he still had not returned, and although a search party was organized early the next morning no trace of him could be found. Just as Horst Graumer had disappeared a quarter of a century earlier, so now had my nephew apparently vanished from the face of the earth.

I was ready to give Matthew up for dead when, on the morning of the fourteenth, he stumbled into my study with twigs and bits of bracken sticking to the material of his rough climbing clothes. His hair was awry; he was bearded; the lower legs of his trousers were strangely slimed and discolored, yet apart from his obvious weariness and grimy aspect he seemed perfectly sound and well nourished.

Seeing this, my first joy at having him back turned to a rage in which I demanded to know “what the devil the young skelp meant by worrying people half to death? — And where in the name of heaven had he *been* this last week? — And did he not know that the entire countryside had been in an uproar over him?” — and so on.

Matthew apologized profusely for everything and condemned himself for his own stupidity, but when his story was told I did

not have it in me to blame him for what had happened; and rightly so. It seemed that he had climbed a particularly steep knoll somewhere on the moors. Upon reaching the summit a mist had set in which prevented his exploration of the peak. Before the mist settled, however, he had been overjoyed to find a single misshapen weed that he did not recognize and which, so far as he knew, was as yet unclassified. He believed it to be similar to the much sought after *Graumer Specimens!*

Intending first to study the plant in its natural surroundings, he did not uproot it but left it as it was. He merely sat down, marked his rough position on a map he had taken with him, and waited for the mist to clear. After about an hour, by which time he was thoroughly drenched, he gave up all hope of the mist clearing before nightfall and set about making the descent.

He found that in the opaque grayness of the mist the downward route he had chosen was considerably more difficult to maneuver than the one by which he had climbed. Indeed, the knoll's steepness — plus the fact that he was wet and uncomfortable — caused him to slip and slither for a short distance down the wild slope. Suddenly, as his slide was coming to an end, he bumped over the edge of a narrow crack in the earth, broke through the bracken which partly covered it, and shot into space with his arms wildly flailing. He fell some distance before landing on his back on a dry ledge at the bottom of the crevice.

When he somewhat dazedly had a look around, he was surprised that he had not suffered a serious injury. He had fallen some twenty feet onto a bank of sandy shingle. The place was a sort of pothole, with walls which were so sheer that in places they overhung. It was plainly impossible to climb out unaided. At his feet was a motionless, slimy-green pool that narrowed to a mere

channel at a point where it vanished under a low archway of limestone at one end of the defile.

The true horror of his situation dawned on him fully when he realized that he had lost his rucksack, and further that his rope was useless to him as he had no grappling hook. It fully appeared that unless a miracle occurred and he could somehow devise a means of getting out, he would be forced to spend the rest of his days in this dank and cheerless place; and those days would not be too many with nothing but the evil-looking water of the scummy pool as sustenance. He did have a small pocket first-aid kit that I had given to him in case of emergencies, and this he used as best he could to clean up his few bruises and abrasions.

After sitting thus occupied, recovering himself, and regaining a little of his composure, Matthew took to exploring his prison. The place had a perceptibly foreboding aura about it, and hanging in the air was a sickly-sweet smell so heavy it seemed almost a taste rather than an odor. All was silent except for a distant *drip, drip, drip* of water. Little light entered the hole from above, but Matthew was not too disheartened for the stone walls were covered with a gray, semiluminescent moss that gave off a dim light.

He had left Eeley-on-the-Moor before noon, and he calculated that by now it must be about seven in the evening. He knew that in another hour or so I would begin to worry about him — but what could he do about it? He was virtually a prisoner, and try as he might he could think of no practical way out. Upon examining his rope he saw that it was badly frayed in two places. He cursed himself for not having checked it before setting out, then hung it over a projecting rock and swung on it to test its capacity to take

his weight. The rope broke twice before he was finally left with a serviceable length of no more than twenty feet or so.

He tied one end of this remaining piece of rope to a fairly large stone but upon tossing it upwards was dismayed to find that it only reached a point a good two or three feet short of the lip of the crevice. All he could do now, he decided, was sit it out and hope that some search party would find him. He realized that no such search party would exist until early morning at the soonest, and so knew that it was pointless to try calling for help.

It did not become noticeably darker, though he knew it must fast be approaching night, and he put this down to the fact that the moss on the walls was supplementing the natural light. He knew his fancy to be correct when, a short while later, he saw twinkling through the crack above him the first stars in the night sky.

Thoroughly tired now, he sat down in the driest place he could find and fell asleep; but his sleep was troubled by nightmare visions of weird events and strange creatures. He awoke several times, stifled by the unnatural and oppressive warmth of the place, to find the echoes of his own cries of terror still ringing in the hole's foul atmosphere. Even when wide awake the next morning the dreams persisted in his memory. In them he had seemed to understand all of the horrible and strangely threatening occurrences.

In one of these dreams there had been a misty landscape of queer rock formations, unfamiliar trees, and giant ferns; plants which, to the best of Matthew's knowledge, had not existed on Earth since the dawn of time. He had been one of a crowd of loathsome ape-like beings, ugly, with flat faces and sloping

foreheads. They had approached a forbidden place, a hole in the earth from which nameless vapors poured out a ghastly stench.

They had captives, these ape men, creatures like themselves — yet monstrously different — who had defied The Laws. These prisoners had lately trespassed upon this holy ground unbidden by the priests, and they had also dared to spy upon the God-things conjured in horrible rituals by those same hierophants. Because of the horror of what they saw they had practiced sedition, calling for the overthrow of the priests and the expulsion of those Gods from Outside. Fearing that this call might *somewhere* be heard, the God-things had paused momentarily in their horrific pleasures to order their priests to punish the offenders — whom they would make recognizable through growing physiological differences!

And indeed those captives were different. . . . They were slimy to the touch and seemed to exude a dreadful moisture which stank evilly. They stumbled rather than walked, apparently afflicted with some nervous disorder which caused their steps to be short and jerky.

But when in his dream Matthew had looked closer at those prisoners of the ape men, then he had seen that he was wrong. They suffered from no nervous disorder — the trouble was all physical. Their legs appeared to be joined from knee to groin by some ghastly fungoid growth, and their arms were similarly fastened to their sides. Their eyes were almost completely scaled over, and their mouths were gone, closed forever by strips of the horrid, scaly substance which was apparently growing over their whole bodies. Matthew knew somehow that this terrible leper-growth was the first phase of their punishment for what they had dared to do — and that the balance was still to be paid.

The entire unholy procession had been led by three creatures different again from the rest. Their foreheads were not so sloped, giving them a position somewhat higher on the evolutionary scale, and they were taller by a head than the others. These were the priests, and they wore the only clothing of the entire assembly: coarse, dark cloaks thrown about their shoulders.

The priests had carried flaring torches, intoning some weird chant which — while Matthew was unable to remember why — he had known in his dream to be immemorially significant. It had been in the form of an invocation to certain “Gods” of an ancient myth cycle. How he understood anything of the dream was a mystery to him; he remembered that on the few occasions when the beings talked to one another, the tongue they used was not one he should normally have been conversant with. Indeed, he said he believed it to be a language dead and vanished from the face of the Earth for some hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years.

Soon the group arrived at the malodorous pit, and at its very rim the priests stood with their torches held high over the hole while their chanting grew in volume and fervor. The evil-smelling vapors swirled up around them, occasionally enveloping them completely from the view of their followers; and then, suddenly, as the chanting reached a fever pitch, the unfortunate ones were thrust forward and one after the other were thrown bodily into that eldritch chasm. They were incapable of screaming for their mouths were scaled over, but even had that not been so they would not have screamed. No, they seemed somehow to *welcome* being thrown into the dreadful abyss.

As the bodies of the unfortunates vanished in reeking darkness, the priests slowly turned toward Matthew, approaching him with

alien and horribly sly smiles upon their faces. Not knowing why he, personally, should suddenly feel so horrified, Matthew nevertheless turned to run — *but could only stumble!* — and in an instant the whole crowd was around him. The evil implication of the looks upon their faces was now all too clear, and he opened his mouth to reject their unspoken accusation, but. . . .

. . . Horror upon horror — *he could barely move his jaws!*

He tried to raise his arms to protect himself but could not do so. It was as though his limbs were pinned to his body and, half knowing what he would see, he glanced down at himself. Even this simple movement seemed to be too great an effort for him, but somehow he accomplished it and saw . . . and saw —

He, too, was one of — *Them!*

His arms were webbed to his sides and his legs were partly joined. His skin was green and foul and he stank of an unholy, sickly-sweetness. But he was hardly given time to examine these abnormalities for the horde had already lifted him into the air and borne him to the edge of the pit!

That, mercifully, was when he awoke.

II

If my memory serves me correctly, that is the way Matthew related to me the contents of his dream in the hole. There were more dreams later, but I have told of this first one in some detail for I believe that in an inexplicable way its events are related to the rest of my story. It is my belief that in his slumbers Matthew had seen actual occurrences from the abysmal prehistory of his terrifying prison. . . .

On his second day in the hole he waded into the pool and found it unpleasantly warm and greasy, as though composed of thick vegetable secretions rather than water. A great thirst was on him but he could not bring himself to drink that foul muck.

Finding that the pool was quite shallow, he waded to the archway and stooped beneath and beyond it. The water — if such it could be called — beyond the arch was only slightly deeper, and the living walls gave off sufficient light for him to see that the same sandy shelf continued in this secondary cave. Wet and slimy, he climbed out onto the shelf and looked about him. There were long, sharp stalactites hanging from above — for here there was no crack in the ceiling — but though these eon-formed stone daggers were fascinating enough in themselves, it was the *other* things which primarily claimed Matthew's astounded attention.

This primeval cavern contained wonders to fill to bursting point the heart of any man of science — and especially a botanist. Protruding from the walls were plants unlike any existing upon the surface of the Earth — huge pod-like things, standing on end all around the walls with their lower roots trailing in the slimy water. Each plant seemed to be growing out of, or depending from, the wall of the cave; or perhaps they had grown up out of the water, later to fasten upon the walls in the manner of certain other climbing, clinging plants.

The things were between five and six feet long top to bottom, as green as the evil mutations in my nephew's dreams. They were also slimy and exuded a vile fluid which dripped off them into the pool. Matthew wondered if this constant dripping of vegetable secretions was the reason the pool was so odious.

Later in that secret cave, after he had recovered from his first amazement at this terrific find, he also discovered some water

which was at least cleaner than that of the pool. It dripped from the tips of those dagger-like, depending rock formations, and although it had an unpleasant taste — an unwholesome acidity — it went far towards quenching his by now burning thirst. Yet he drank falteringly, as though his whole body instinctively drew back from having anything to do with that unknown hole in the earth.

But now he was filled with anger. What a find! A discovery so immense that he was “made” for life, his future assured, if he could but get out of that accursed pit. It was then that he first saw the means of his salvation. In the gravel of the shelf were many half-buried flat stones. If he could get a sufficient number of these stones to the other side of the natural archway, he could perhaps build them up to form a platform from which to throw his weighted rope over the lip of the crevice.

His difficulties were many. There was the unpleasant *feel* of the water (for which he had developed a morbid dread); the great weight of the large stones; the fact that he quickly exhausted the supply of readily available stones on the surface and had to dig in the sandy shingle for others.

It was when he was moving the first of these stones that he noticed, in the dim light, the intricate, runic designs cut into their surfaces. Strange cabalistic signs literally covered them, and although he had no knowledge of their meaning, still they filled him with dread. They reminded him of similar glyphs once glimpsed in the university’s rare books department — in the pages of a book by von Junzt — and again he experienced that reluctance of soul encountered upon drinking the dripping water. Nonetheless, he progressed with his work until he had a platform of stones almost three feet high against the wall of his prison.

This took him halfway through his third miserable day in the hole. Though he could now almost reach the lip of the crevice with his weighted rope, he had exhausted his supply of stones and was too weak from hunger and exhaustion to dig for more. He knew that soon he would be starving and that if he was ever to complete his task and get out of the place he must have food. . . . But what to eat?

For all he knew the plants in the inner cave may well be poisonous, but they were his only hope; and so he took his first bite from one of them. That first bite, while it made him feel sick, was nevertheless strangely satisfying. Later he was able completely to fill himself from the plant and the strength he gained from this singular food source was prodigious. After a while the sickly taste no longer made him feel ill; indeed, he began to enjoy a narcotic sense of well being.

Just how true this was — the fact that he had deeply drugged himself — was not realized until another evil dream released him from his torpor. He had been in the hole almost seven days when his own screaming roused him from the throes of nightmare. He could fairly well gauge just how much time had passed by the heavy stubble grown on his chin.

In his new dream the priest-creatures had sealed off the sacrificial cavern with holy, inscribed stones — the very stones for which he now dug so frantically in the floor of the pit — but there had been much more than that to the dream; Matthew admitted so much but would tell me no more of that final nightmare, merely stating that it “did not bear relating.”

With his new-found strength and in his frantic haste, it took him only a few hours to complete the platform. At last he was able to fling his stone laden rope up out of the defile and, amaz-

ingly, with his very first attempt came success! The rough stone wedged, and held, and without a great deal of effort he was able to haul himself out. Elated, he scrambled down the knoll and hurried back across the moors to Eeley.

In just a few days Eeley and High-Marske got over the upset that Matthew had caused; the groups which had gathered in the village pubs to chat and wonder about his disappearance themselves dispersed. Then, after Matthew had assured police Sergeant Mellor that the pit was so out of the way as to create no menace to village children, he was able to get down to his studies again.

He had unintentionally brought back with him a portion of the plant from which he had eaten; he assured me that in his haste to escape from the pit he would never consciously have thought of it. In fact his sample was one that he had torn from the plant to eat later and which he found, upon his return, still in his pocket where he had put it. Though the fragment was rapidly deteriorating, it was still firm enough to permit him to study it.

And Matthew's studies occupied him completely for the next few days. The hybrid weed he had found atop the knoll was all but forgotten and the possibility that more such fascinating specimens existed in that area was matterless to him. For the moment all his energies were concentrated on his as yet unidentified sample.

One afternoon three or four days after his return, I was sitting in my study checking through some notes on the ailments, real or imagined, of some of my elder patients, when Matthew burst unbidden upon me from the corridor. His eyes were quite wild and he seemed somehow to have aged years. There was a look of ab-

solute puzzlement — or shock — on his face, and his jaw hung slack in undisguised amazement.

“Uncle,” he blurted, “perhaps you can help me. Goodness knows I *need* help. I just can’t understand it . . . or don’t want to. It’s not natural. Natural? — why, it’s *impossible* — and yet there it is. . . .” He shook his head in defeat.

“Oh?” I said. “What’s impossible, Matthew?”

For a moment he was silent, then: “Why, that plant — or *thing*! It has no right to exist. None of them has. At first I thought I must be mistaken, but then I checked and double-checked and checked again — and I know I’m right. They just can’t do it!”

As patiently as I could, I asked: “Who, exactly, are ‘they,’ and what is it that ‘they’ can’t do?”

“The plants,” he told me in an exasperated tone of voice. “They can’t reproduce! Or if they can I’ve no idea how they do it. And that’s only a part of it. In attempting to classify the things I’ve tried tricks that would get me locked up if any conventional botanist knew of them. Why! — I can’t even say for sure that they’re plants — in fact I’m almost certain that they’re *not*. And that leads on to something else —”

He leaned forward in his chair and stared at me. “Seeing as how I’ve decided they’re not plants, I thought perhaps they might be some obscure animal form — like those sea animals which were mistaken for plants for such a long time — I mean, anemones and the like. I’ve checked it all out, and . . . no such thing! I’ve got a whole library of books up there,” he indicated with a toss of his head to the upstairs room, “but nothing that’s any good to me.”

“So you’re baffled,” I said. “But surely you’ve made some mistake? It’s obvious that whatever they are they must be one or the other, plants or animals. Call in a second opinion.”

“Never! — Certainly not until I’ve done a lot more work on my own,” Matthew cried. “This thing is big, fantastic. A new form of life! But you must excuse me, uncle. I have to get back to work. There’s so much I’ve got to understand. . . .”

Suddenly he paused, seeming uneasy; his manner became somehow, well, furtive. “I’ve especially got to understand that other thing — the structure of the cells, I mean. It’s quite uncanny. How can it be explained? The cell-structure is almost — it’s almost human!” And with that he hurried out of my room.

For a moment I laughed to myself. Everything is fantastic to the young. Matthew had made a mistake, of course, for if those things were neither animals nor plants — then what in heaven’s name were they?

III

The ghastly thing started the next morning, showing first of all in small greenish patches of flaky yet slimy substance on Matthew’s arms and chest. Just a few patches at first, but they refused to submit to the application of antiseptic swabs or the recently introduced fungicidal creams, and within the course of the day a loathsome green network had spread over the boy’s entire frame so that I was forced to confine him to his bed.

I did all I could to reassure and comfort him, and later in the evening hung a notice on my waiting-room door informing my

patients, mercifully few and with only trivial complaints, that due to alterations in my work schedule I was forced to holiday early and only very urgent calls would be answered. I added to this the address of a friend of mine in Hawthorpe, a consulting doctor whom I contacted with a similar story of altered work schedules and who willingly accepted my plan for any of my flock who might require medical attention.

All this done I attempted to fathom the horror that had overtaken my nephew, and in this I could only be doomed to failure through the completely alien nature of the thing. The only definite statement of fact I could make about it was that I knew certain of its symptoms: Matthew had hardly eaten at all since his adventure in the pit, neither had I seen him take any sort of drink, and yet he had shown no signs of hunger. I was not to know it but the metamorphosis taking place in his body was one which did not yet require to be fed. A new way of feeding was developing. . . .

Dazedly, desperately attempting to understand this monstrous thing come so suddenly upon my house, I worked all through the night and into the next morning; but having done everything I could think of to check the vile *acceleration* of Matthew's affliction, and failing, I suggested calling in a specialist. It was the worst thing I could have done. Matthew reacted like a wild thing, screaming that there was nothing anyone could do for him and that "knowledge of those *things* in the pit must spread no further!" Plainly he believed that the disease had come back with him from the pit on the moors, that he had poisoned his system by eating of those obscene plants — and in all truth I was hardly able to dispute it.

Sobbing and shrieking, swearing that he would soon cease to be a bother to me, he made me promise not to tell anyone of the horror or bring in anyone to see him. I thought I knew his meaning about ceasing to be a bother: in all my textbooks I could find nothing like my nephew's disease; only leprosy could be said even to approximate it, and leprosy did not have its fantastic acceleration. Reluctantly I calculated that the virulence of Matthew's disease would kill him within a fortnight, and for this reason I agreed to his every request.

The next night, out for a breath of badly needed fresh air, I managed to catch Ginger, my cat. Since first Matthew returned from his prolonged ramble Ginger had refused to enter the house, preferring to howl horribly on the step outside for hours on end. I brought him in and left him in a very agitated state downstairs with a bowl of milk. The next morning — the fourth morning, I think, of the manifestation of the horror — I found Ginger's fearful, death-stiffened corpse on the dispensary floor. One of the room's small windowpanes was cracked where the unfortunate and terrified animal had tried to escape. But from what? Animals can sense things too deep for the blunted human mind to grasp — and what Ginger had sensed had frightened him to death.

Other animals, too, had noticed something strange about my house, and dogs in particular would come nowhere near the place. Even my pony, tied in a warm lean-to behind the house, had danced nervously in his stall all through those long nights. . . .

On the same morning that I found Ginger dead, when I carefully slipped back the sheets from Matthew's sleeping form, doc-

tor though I am and despite the fact that my experience has included every type of illness and ailment, I recoiled in terror from that which lay upon the bed. Three hours later, at about eleven in the morning, when I was satisfied that I had done everything I possibly could, I laid down my tools. I had worked with surgical swabs and scrapers, sponges and acids, and my nephew's body beneath the dressings was not a pretty sight. But at least it was clean—for the moment.

When the anesthetic wore off and Matthew awoke, though he was obviously in great pain, he managed to tell me of the new dream which had disturbed his sleep. He had seemed to be in a misty place where there was only a voice, continually repeating a phrase in an alien tongue, which as before he had somehow been able to understand. The voice had called:

"Ye shall not *associate* with them. Ye shall not *know* them or walk *among* them or *near* them. . . ." And Matthew had been afraid for his very soul.

That afternoon we slept. Both of us were near exhaustion and it was only later in the evening, when I was disturbed by his cries, that I awoke. He was having yet another nightmare and I listened intently by his bedside in case he said something new in connection with the horror. Had I roused him then I might have saved his mind, but I am glad now that I did nothing, being satisfied to sit listening while he rambled in his sleep. It seemed to me that he was better asleep; whatever dreams he experienced, they could in no way be worse than the reality.

I was deeply shocked by the poisonous odor that drifted up from his restless form, for only a few hours earlier I had cleansed

him completely of every sign of the horror. I had hoped that my extreme surgical efforts might be sufficient to halt the rapid encroachment of the dread growth, but I had been grasping at straws. That smell made it all too obvious that my hopes had been in vain. Then, as I continued watching, Matthew began to writhe and gibber dementedly.

"No, no," he gasped, "I will *not* stand like this, as though I were part of the place, with the muck dripping off me. *I will not!*" For a long moment his chest rose and fell spasmodically. Then, in a calmer voice, he continued:

"No one must learn of the pit. . . . Sinned. . . . Committed the ultimate abomination, and soon I must answer the call. . . . No priests, no ceremony for me. . . . Dead before the dinosaurs. . . . And no one must see me. . . . Too many inquisitive minds, curious delvers in mysteries. . . . Spread the thing across the whole world. . . . God knows. . . . Tell no one. . . . No one must know. . . . Ultimate sin. . . . *Heaven help me!*"

There was a long pause here, and in Matthew's sleeping attitude I could suddenly detect an air of listening. Finally he began to talk again: "But these voices! Who are they? I don't know these names. John Jamieson Hustam. . . . Gint Rillson. . . . Feth Bandr? And the others — what of them? Ganhfl Degrahms? Sgyss-Twell? Neblozt? Ungl? Uh'ang?"

At this point he grew even quieter. His lips drew back from his teeth and the cords of his neck stood out grotesquely. Cold sweat appeared on his brow and his low moaning became coarser, merely a cracked whisper. "That other, weak, dying voice! *Who's that? What's that?* . . . Whisperer — who are you? Your name sounds famil. . . . No — no, it's not so!" Now his voice fell so low it became a mere hiss of breath:

“You . . . *can't* . . . be!”

Suddenly, with one hoarsely screamed word — or name — he sat rigidly upright, wide awake. Eyes bugging he gazed terrified, unseeing, about the room. For a moment I was at a loss to understand — but then I saw the foam gathering at the corner of his mouth and the way his eyes were beginning to roll vacantly in his poisoned, suddenly grinning face. I sat by him then, cradling him in my arms as, sobbing, he rocked back and forth, completely robbed of his sanity.

At the time I did not understand that name he screamed, but now I understand everything. Especially I know what it was that finally proved too much for my nephew's severely overtaxed mind and body. That which he had — dreamed?

Matthew did not recover, and from that moment on I had to care for him like a newborn babe; he was incapable of even the most basic rationalization. Yet in a way I believe that this was the best thing that could have happened. There was little I could do to help him, physically or mentally, and I had completely given up my brief idea of calling in a specialist. No doctor would ever have dreamed, while the chance remained of the horror being communicable, of risking passing that loathsomeness on to another human being — which was, of course, the main reason I had stopped practicing. No, I was on my own with Matthew, and all I could do was wait and see what form the advancing terror would take.

Up to this time I myself had shown no sign of having contracted the disease, and after every session with my nephew I made sure that I bathed, cleansing myself thoroughly. True, lately I had shown a loss of appetite (but surely, in retrospect, that

was only to be expected?) which at the time was an additional worry for I recognized the symptom. Still, I told myself, in all probability my fears were purely psychological.

Early the following morning, while he slept, I gave Matthew a further anesthetic and removed his dressings. By now I was almost inured to shock and the sight of that dreadful green network growing *in* the wounds — in his very flesh — only verified what I had expected. The smell from the uncovered areas was terrible, and I saw that far from being beneficial my cutting and burning had probably worsened the boy's condition. Indeed, by midday I knew that there was no hope left for him at all. His arms were webbing to his sides and his thighs already clung together; the growth was spreading so rapidly over and through him that I knew he had only a day or so left.

It is not my intention to tell the way in which the horror increased in Matthew from that time onwards. Suffice to say that I began to lace the baths I was taking with ever increasing frequency with carbolic — a little more each time — until, when I last bathed just yesterday, the percentage of acid in the water was sufficient to raise small blisters on my legs. Yet my efforts seemed worthwhile, for even after Matthew — got away — and shuffled off to the moors two days ago my body was still clean, though my appetite was nonexistent. I had hoped, indeed prayed, that this inability of mine to eat was psychological — but again all my hopes were in vain.

There, I have admitted it: yes, I too am infected! Shortly after I started to write this, yesterday evening after returning from the moors, I noticed the first discolored, scaly spot on the back of my hand. . . .

But in my hurry to get done with this I have jumped ahead of myself. I must go back two nights, to the evening Matthew vanished into the mist, for the worst is yet to be told.

IV

Believing that he only had a few more hours left at the most, and wanting to be near him in case he regained his sanity shortly before passing away — as has happened in less outré cases — I had been sitting by Matthew's bed. There I had dropped off to sleep, only to be roused later by the frantic tremblings and quakings from the now totally changed creature before me. By this time my nephew's only resemblance to anything human was his general outline. His eyes burned with a horrific intensity through the thin slits in the green mask which his face had become.

As I came fully awake I saw the . . . *Thing* — I can barely bring myself to think of it as Matthew — moving. Slowly it bent upward from the waist, trembling and straining in every part, until finally it sat upright. The awful head turned slowly in my direction, and then I heard the last words my nephew was ever to speak:

“W-waterB bath Get — me — to — the — b-bath. . . .”

The thing had swung the green web which passed for the lower part of its body over the edge of the bed and somehow had managed to stand. In shuffling steps — still attired in the dressing-gown I had loaned to Matthew in compensation for quartering him in a drafty room — it made for the door. In a moment or two

I recovered myself and went quickly to the aid of my . . . my nephew, only to discover that his mutation, whatever human attributes might have been lost, did not lack strength. Matthew's movements were only obstructed by his covering of rapidly stiffening green growth; I had merely to steady him while he grew accustomed to this new, shuffling locomotive system. Exactly how I managed I do not recall, but eventually I got the shuffler into the bath where he sat, propped up and shuddering, until I could half-fill the tub with warm water.

It was then, after running to and fro half-a-dozen times with my huge iron kettle, that I noticed something happening in the bath — something which so terrified me that I only just managed to stagger away, out of the bathroom, before I fainted dead away on the floor. . . .

Darkness had fallen by the time I regained consciousness. Remembering what had caused me to faint, I started violently; then, feeling the stone of the floor against my cheek, I got to my feet. When I had last seen my nephew — or rather the thing which he had become — he had been *secreting* greenish droplets of some unnameable ichor into the bath. But now, except for that — liquid — the bath was empty.

Galvanized into frantic haste I followed the thing's tracks, green droplets which glistened damply on the floor, until I eventually discovered the note on my writing desk. And its message told me that the Matthew-thing was still crazed, for its contents were undeniably the ramblings of madness. Numb with shock, horror, and disbelief I deciphered the almost illegible writing upon a now odious sheet of damp, green-spattered notepaper, and made it out to read:

“Water not right. . . . Hungry. . . . Must go to pit. . . . Pool. . . . Don’t try to find me. . . . I am all right. . . . Not diseased. . . .

‘M’”

It was after I followed those evil droplets from my desk to the back door, and found it swinging open — after I realized that the entire house could be contaminated and after I shudderingly, more closely studied the contents of the bath — that I heard the sudden scream from outside. I ran back to the door and threw it open. Staggering toward my house from the moors and moving in the direction of the village, gasping and panting, was the mist-wreathed figure of Ben Carter, the village poacher.

“Lock your doors, doctor!” he hoarsely yelled as he saw me. “There’s something horrible loose on the moors — something *horrible!*” Without pausing in his stumbling run he went by my gate and gradually vanished into the mist. To an extent I was relieved; he would not be reporting the nature of what he had seen to the police. Not immediately at any rate — not with that brace of fine hares swinging round his neck. I watched Ben until the mist had completely swallowed him up and then I rapidly donned a raincoat and plunged out into the darkness.

My task was hopeless. With night already settled on the moors and a thickening mist to contend with, I stood no chance of finding him. Indeed I was fortunate in the end, over an hour later, even to find the road back to Eeley. Nonetheless I knew that with the dawn I would have to go out on the moors and try again. I could not leave him out there in that state. What if someone else were to find him?

Obviously Matthew had headed for the pit — his scrawled note

had made that much at least clear — but how was I ever to find that terrible place without a clue as to its whereabouts? It was then that I remembered the map upon which Matthew said he had marked his location on the knoll. The map — of course!

I found it in his room. . . .

I hardly slept at all that night — my dreams would not permit sleep — and early morning found me setting out over the moors. I will not describe the route I took for reasons which must be perfectly obvious. Heaven forbid it, but in the event of my final plan not working it is best that no one else knows of that place on the moors.

Eventually, in mid morning, I found the terrible hole in the ground where all of this evil had begun. Even to my untrained eyes it was all too plain that there was something hideously wrong with the vegetation around the mouth of that pit. The plants, even those which were common and recognizable, were all strangely withered and mutated. *Sehr sonderbare, mysteriöse Unkräuter!*

I knew that if I was ever to be sure of what I had started to suspect, if I was ever to have definite proof, then I would have to climb down into the hole. All along I had foreseen this, but now the very thought of it was more than sufficient to cause me to shudder horribly . . . And my flesh was still creeping as I hammered my stake into the earth and made fast my rope, for even up there in the misty morning sunlight the air was tainted with an all too familiar smell.

Hurriedly now, for I feared my courage would soon desert me, I lowered myself into the hole. Climbing down into dimness, I was immediately aware of the poisonous quality of the at-

mosphere; but I was given little chance to dwell on the thought for soon my feet found the platform of stones which Matthew had built.

In the feeble light I could see that part of the platform had tumbled down, and close by there was a monstrously suggestive depression in the sandy shingle of the shelf. As I studied this hollow it suddenly, shockingly dawned on me that in his condition Matthew would never have been able to *climb* down here, even though his rope was still hanging where he had left it. The difficulties he must have faced even in the climbing of the knoll seemed insurmountable; yet I was certain that he had managed it and was even now somewhere nearby in the dimness. I was certain because of that depression in the shingle. . . .

For while there were other marks in the sand — the signs of my nephew's previous visit — this one was plainly deeper, fresher, and *different*. It was exactly the kind of hollow one would expect a falling body to make in wet sand! . . . I turned my mind hurriedly away from the thought.

Matthew had described the glowing moss on the walls of the place, and sure enough it was there, but I was unwilling to explore any further in its light alone. I took out my pocket-torch and switched it on. The torch must have received a bang in my climbing for its beam was now weak and intermittent. Nor did the mist, which was thickening up above, help any; it only served to shut out the dim light filtering down from the crack.

First I shone the beam of my torch around the pallid walls and over the surface of the soupy water; then I sought out the natural archway where the pool passed out of sight. Feeling my courage ebbing again I quickly waded into the pool. The way that slime *oozed* around my legs made me tremble violently and I was vastly

relieved that the foul muck did not reach the tops of my waders.

I went straight to the archway, lowering my head and bending my back to pass beyond it. There, in the dingy confines of the cave, the first things that showed in the flickering light of my torch were the hanging daggers of stone depending from the vaulted ceiling. Then, as I turned to my left, the beam passed over something else — a shape slumped against the wall.

Not daring to move I stood there, shaking feverishly, a cold sweat upon my brow. The only sound other than my pounding heart was the slow drip, drip, drip of falling droplets of God-only-knows what evil moisture.

The hair of my neck bristled in a fearful dread but as my fear gradually subsided I began slowly to move again, swinging my torch around to the right. This time when my beam picked out the thing against the wall I gripped my torch firmly and moved closer. It was one of the plants — but not quite as Matthew had described them. This one hung soggily from the wall of the cave and there was no firmness about it. I concluded that it was either dead or dying and saw that I must be correct when I swung my beam down the length of the thing. A great portion of it had been stripped away. I guessed that this had been the specimen from which my nephew had eaten.

Then something else caught my eye, something which very dully reflected the light from my torch. Reaching out with my free hand I touched the hard object which seemed to be imbedded in the plant about halfway up its length. Whatever it was, possibly a metallic crystal of some sort, it came away in my hand and I put it in my pocket for future reference.

More daring now, I moved further into the cave, examining more of the green pods as I came upon them, still finding them

frightful in some strange way but unable to account completely for my fear. And then I stopped dead. I had almost forgotten just what I was looking for — but now I remembered. . . .

In a dark corner one of the plant things stood all alone with its lower roots trailing in the soupy pool. It would have been just like all the other specimens except for one shocking difference. . . . *It was wearing the dressing-gown I had loaned to Matthew!*

And more: as I swung my torch beam in disbelief up and down the length of the thing *it blinked at me!* It blinked — thin slits opened and closed where eyes should be, and in that moment of madness, in that instant of utter insanity, as my very mind buckled — I looked into the agonized eyes of Matthew Worthy!

How to describe the rest.

Oh, I was transformed in one mind-shattering moment. My torch fell from nerveless fingers and I heard myself scream a hoarse, babbling scream of horror. I threw up my hands and staggered back, away from what I had seen, away from the brain-blasting abnormality against the wall. Then I turned to flee full-tilt — shrieking, splashing through the vileness of the pool — through a maze of dripping stalactites, past a host of green, insiduously oozing *things* — bumping in my haste from wall to wall, sometimes coming into contact with slimy obscenities which had no right to exist. And all the time I screamed and babbled shamelessly, even as I clawed my way up the dangling rope and hauled myself out into the daylight, even as I plummeted headlong down the steep slope heedless of life or limb, until I tripped and flew forward into merciful oblivion. . . .

Merciful oblivion, I say, and it is the truth, for had I not knocked myself unconscious I have no doubt that I would have remained permanently mindless. What I had *seen* had been ter-

rible enough without the other. That other which I had *heard* had been, if anything, worse. For even as the torch fell from my fingers and I screamed, other voices had screamed with me! Voices which could not be "heard" physically — for their owners were incapable of physical speech — voices I heard with my mind alone, which were utterly horrible and alien to me and full of eternal misery. . . .

When I came to my senses I was lying at the foot of the knoll. I refrained from an immediate mental examination of what I knew now to be the horrible truth, for therein lay a return to madness. Instead I brushed myself off and hurried back as quickly as my throbbing head would allow to Eeley. My house and practice lay at the extreme edge of the village, but nonetheless I approached it from the fields and let myself in at the back door. I burnt my waders immediately, noting especially that the slime upon them blazed fiercely with a sulphurous brightness. Later, after I had scrubbed myself from head to toe, examining each limb minutely and finding no trace of the horror, I remembered the rock crystal I had put in my pocket.

In the clear daylight it was obviously not a crystal; it appeared to be more like a bracelet of some sort, and yet this fact did not properly surprise me. The soft metal links must have long since oxidized for as I examined the rotted thing all of it — with the exception of a small flat circle or disc — crumbled away in my hands. Even this solid, circular portion, about an inch and one half across, was mostly slimy and green. I placed it in a flask of dilute acid to clean it; by which time, of course, I knew what it was.

As I watched the acid doing its work I began, involuntarily, to tremble. My mind was a turmoil of terrible thoughts. I knew what my nephew had become, and presumably the partly eaten thing which had provided this metal clue had also once been human. Certainly it had been some sort of being from any one of many periods of time. I could not help but ask myself: in the latter stages of change or after the change was complete, *could the pit-creatures feel anything?*

Watching the seething mass in the flask I suddenly began to babble idiotically and had to battle consciously with myself to stop it. No wonder Matthew had been baffled with regard to the reproductive system of these pitiful horrors. How does a magnet cause a pin to become magnetic? Why will one rotten apple in a barrel ruin all the other fruit? Oh, yes — eating from one of the things had helped Matthew contract the change, but that was not what had started the thing. *Proximity* was sufficient! Nor was the horror truly a disease, as Matthew had tried to tell me in his awful note, but a *devolution* — a gestalt of human being and thing — both living, if such could be called life, and dependent one upon the other.

This was the sort of thing I was babbling to myself as the acid completed its work, and I shook so that I had to steady myself before I was able to draw out from the acid the flat, now shiny disc.

What was it Matthew had dreamed? “They had walked this holy ground unbidden. . . .” Had that been sufficient in the old days — in prehistory, when the area about the pit must have been far more poisonous than it was now — to bring about the change? I think that even at the beginning Matthew must have partly

guessed the truth, for had he himself not told me that he found the cell structure to be "almost human"?

Poor Matthew — that name he screamed before going mad. At last I understood it all. There it all was before me: the final, leaping horror. My own nephew, an unwilling, though perhaps not completely *unknowing* anthropophagite. A cannibal!

For the shiny thing I held in my shuddering hand was a German watch of fairly modern appearance, and on the back was an inscription in German. An inscription so simple that even I, unversed in that language, could translate it to read:

"WITH LOVE, FROM GERDA TO HORST". . . .

Since then it has taken long hours to pull myself together sufficiently to formulate my plan, that plan I have already mentioned and yet which even now I hardly dare think about. I had fervently hoped that I would never have to use it but now, with the spread of the poison through my body, it appears that I must. . . .

When the ashes of my house have cooled the police will find this manuscript locked in a safe in the deep, damp cellar, but long before the flames have died down I shall have returned to the pit. I will take with me as much petrol as I can carry. My plan is simple really, and I shall know no pain. Nor will the *inhabitants* of that place know pain, not if a powerful drug may yet affect them. As the anesthetic takes hold and while I am still able, I shall pour the petrol on the surface of that evil pool.

My statement is at an end —

— Perhaps tonight puzzled observers will wonder at the pillar of sulphurous fire rising over the moors. . . .

Darghud's Doll

"So you're thinking of doing a book on basic magic, are you, Dawson?" Titus Crow broached the subject as soon as he had made me welcome with his customary offering of a glass of fine brandy. I glanced enviously about the occultist's marvelously appointed study, a room I had fortunately been able to view on a few rare previous occasions, before answering him.

"That's right, Crow, yes. In fact, with the help of a few good source-books, I've got quite a bit of it done already; but there's this one chapter that's giving me some difficulty."

"Yes, I remember you mentioned it on the telephone — imitative magic, I believe you said?"

I nodded in agreement. "Right. I know *why* it's supposed to work, and even *how* — but I'm damned if I can find more than two or three really well-documented cases. I mean, the theory of the thing is all well enough — but what about the facts?"

For a moment or two Crow thought about it, and the silence of the room was broken only by the occasional creak of branches from the nighted garden beyond the draped windows, and the oddly erratic ticking of a tall, four-handed, strangely hieroglyphed and coffin-shaped clock in one corner.

"Imitative or sympathetic magic," he mused, frowning as he cocked his head on one side in contemplation. "Well, I'm afraid you're out of luck, Dawson. I do know of a few cases, yes, and one in particular which I suppose you could say is rather well

authenticated — but you must realize that in many such cases there exists more than an element of chance. The simple truth is that unless the evidence is one hundred percent conclusive . . . then the phenomena of imitative magic are usually purely coincidental.

“But anyway,” he quickly continued after a moment’s pause, “at a loss as I may be in that direction, I can probably supplement your list of source-books. Let me see now. . . . Yes: you could try McPherson’s *Primitive Beliefs in N. E. Scotland*, and Trachtenberg’s *Jewish Magic and Superstitions*. Then you might find Oman’s *Cults, Customs, and Superstitions of India* useful, or, perhaps, Dr. E. Mauchamp’s *La Sorcellerie au Maroc*. And then there’s —”

“Hold on a minute there, Titus!” I cried, rudely breaking in on him. “You changed the subject a bit fast there, didn’t you? Come on, now, what about this ‘well-authenticated’ case you mentioned? Is it something I shouldn’t know about?”

“No, but. . . . Well, you see, Dawson, I knew the people of the story personally, and. . . .” He pursed his lips. “If I did tell it, I’d have to alter the facts a bit, and the names of the characters. You see, Dawson? It would no longer be truly ‘authentic,’ now would it? And after all, you’re after *facts*; which in turn makes the telling of a disguised story rather pointless. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, whether I can use it or not,” I answered in desperation, “I’ve simply got to hear it now. I mean, you’ve got me going, Crow! You usually do get me going, and you very well know it. Now come on — how about the story?”

“As you wish,” he answered resignedly. “But first let me fill your glass again.” He brought his chair over then, and I pulled mine a little closer to the fire; and in that strange, quiet room,

with only the weird ticking of the great clock as a background to his voice, my host began the tale:

“It was all of nine years ago that Dr. Maurice Jamieson went out to South Africa to visit his ailing brother, David, also a doctor, at his tiny hospital on the south shore of Lake Ngami.

“Now David Jamieson had had the so-called ‘missionary instinct’ — a compassion, an urge to help underdeveloped peoples — ever since his boyhood. If his talents as a healer hadn’t led him to medicine, then most probably he would have ended up in Africa anyway — wearing ‘The Cloth.’ As it was, in the fifteen years he’d been out there he had built himself a remarkable reputation with the natives of the region. He was looked upon by the various tribes almost as a god.

“David’s trouble, his brother found when his landrover reached the hospital from Livingstone, was simply that he had been pushing himself too hard — and he’d been doing it for fifteen years. The man was quite simply run down, and Maurice Jamieson put him straight into one of his own beds in the hospital, ordering him to stay there and be looked after while he himself tended the hospital’s primitive clientele.

“Well, apparently Jamieson’s diagnosis of his brother’s trouble had been perfectly correct, and the rest-cure had been applied none too soon. Within two or three days the frail, sun-tanned doctor developed a raging enteric fever, and it was plain that had he not taken to his bed when ordered the fever might well have knocked him down for good. His condition added considerably to the strenuous work already being done by his brother and the hospital’s two trained native nurses. For you see, Dawson, David Jamieson’s fever had not confined itself to him.

This particularly nasty disease had been busy in the marshlands of the Okavango Basin, just across the narrow neck of Lake Ngami, since a time almost a week prior to the English doctor's arrival; and in ones and twos canoes containing sick natives had been crossing the lake to the hospital for some ten days.

"So things went for the first three weeks, and David Jamieson slowly recovered from his fever and began to put on weight again in his hospital bed. With most of the natives back on their feet and returned across the lake to their marshland villages, Dr. Maurice Jamieson found he had a little more time to himself.

"Now the doctor had a hobby; he was something of an entomologist. Naturally, when first he decided to go out to his brother in Africa, he had seen the trip as a marvelous opportunity to add some tropical specimens to his collection. To this end he had taken with him certain items of entomological kit: tweezers and a butterfly-net, name-cards and a notebook — and, most important of all, a set of variously-sized molds and the quick-drying artificial resin with which to fill them.

"This simple system was better by far than the old method of preservation and mounting, and the specimens thus encased could be examined minutely from all angles. Indeed, they were trapped as firmly as those prehistoric flies in amber which you can find in most museums, and when the resin was set it was as clear and hard as glass.

"In the evenings, when his work was done and the remaining patients had been properly bedded down for the night, Maurice Jamieson would get out into the large, enclosed gardens of the hospital and lose himself to the doubtless delightful diversions of 'bug-hunting.' He collected and categorized specimen after specimen, until the time came when his brother was almost well

enough to be up and about again. . . . Which was when the trouble started.

“You see, some of the natives effectively treated at the hospital had been M’bulus, possibly the most unfriendly and ‘uncivilized’ of the local tribes, and hitherto they had never bothered to take their troubles to the ‘white Mganga.’ Their own Mganga, Darghud the witch-doctor, had always treated their ailments himself — and allegedly he was a man as well versed in native medicine as he was in Black Magic. This enteric disease, though, patently had the witch-doctor foxed. For a long time the chief of the M’bulus, Notka, who had long studied the benefits reaped by the other tribes, had been pressing for good relations with the hospital. Now Notka himself had gone down with the enteritis, against which Darghud’s ministrations seemed of no earthly use. So the chief sent his eldest son and the Mganga Darghud across the lake to bring back some of the potent medicine of David Jamieson.

“Now this was the problem: David Jamieson, before his brother’s arrival, had discovered the best treatment for the virulent enteric disease to be penicillin — with the result that only two shots of the medicine remained in the hospital’s dispensary. Maurice Jamieson intended to use those shots on his brother, to finalize David’s treatment, and he had one of the nurses explain the facts to the bone-rattling Mganga and to chief Notka’s anxious son.

“Picture it, Dawson: Darghud, the painted savage, the witch-doctor, sent like a messenger-boy by his chief, against his own wishes and heathen judgment, to beg healing juju from the white Mgangas — only to be perfunctorily refused and turned away! It was too much. Much more than that, however, it was the chance

Darghud had been waiting for; the opportunity to defame the white men, the Great Mgangas, and perhaps even get rid of them!

“There in the hospital grounds, in front of the chief’s son, Darghud puffed himself up in black rage, spitting on the ground at Maurice Jamieson’s feet and flinging an itchy white powder in the face of the nurse-cum interpreter. Before the astonished doctor could recover from his surprise (remember, Dawson, that to him the choice had been a simple, logical one; two shots could hardly help chief Notka across the lake, they wouldn’t provide a sufficiently large dosage, but they were absolutely necessary in the completion of his brother’s recovery) the Mganga passed him a great, wriggling beetle. Then Darghud stalked away, his two cringing, servile companions — the paddlers of his canoe — close on his heels.

“The black interpreter, when he’d managed to get the white powder out of his eyes, backed hurriedly away as soon as he saw the object of Dr. Jamieson’s puzzled scrutiny — the squirming, chitinous creature that he held in his hand — Darghud’s great beetle!

“When Jamieson questioned the black’s concern, he was told that the beetle was a ‘bad charm,’ designed to bring down evil on the person of its receiver. He advised the doctor to throw the thing far, far away — and then to pray most earnestly to God. Maurice Jamieson laughed at the suggestion, remarking that the beetle was of a sort he’d never seen before, and that he was certainly *not* going to throw it away; however, the nurse, by all means, could pray for him if he wished! Then he immediately went to his room and placed the beetle in a mold, pouring thick resin from a freshly opened bottle over its wriggling form. He left the whole to set and thought no more about it . . . until later.

“That evening, as usual, when the last few patients had been attended to for the night, Jamieson went into the gardens and had a look under the bushes to see if he could find any new bugs worth adding to his collection. His usual enthusiasm was lacking, however (a bit of a headache), and besides, there was that disturbing, rhythmic drumming from over the lake. . . .

“When he went back to his room his first thought was of the beetle, the fetish-creature given him by Darghud. But the solid, clear-resin block in which the thing should now have lain dead and immobile, perfectly preserved and displayed forever, was barren of any sign of the insect! The only solution, the only answer to the puzzle, seemed to Jamieson to be that the beetle had somehow struggled out of the mold before the resin was properly set; something unprecedented in his experience. On the other hand (he told himself), it could be that the new bottle of resin was inferior, perhaps affected by the heat. After all, the stuff had been produced for use in rather cooler climes. The next morning, though, Jamieson did notice that all his other new specimens, locked in resin from the same bottle, had set as perfectly as any he ever treated in England.

“Three days later — during which time, incidentally, that unusual headache of Jamieson’s, first felt on the evening of the beetle’s disappearance, had constantly nagged him — his brother was up and about again. David Jamieson was paler than before, but chirpy and a lot more energetic, and so his bug-collecting brother decided it was time he took leave of the place. The heat seemed to be bothering him more and more; likewise, day and night, the insistent throb of drums from over the lake; his original enthusiasm for his brother’s practice and the obscurity of the lakeside hospital had drastically fallen off. He put it all down to

too much sun, and on the fourth morning after Darghud's visit he climbed back into the passenger seat of his guide's landrover to begin the long ride back to Livingstone. Five days later he was back in 'Blighty'

"Now I've explained, Dawson, how Dr. Jamieson believed his continuing headache to be due to an overdose of the African sun; but why should the thing continue so *persistently* — worsening, in fact — in England? And ordinary remedies seemed of no use whatsoever."

For a moment there was silence as Crow refilled our glasses. Then he sat back, took a sip of brandy, and carried on:

"Well, now that we've seen Maurice Jamieson safely returned to England, it might be as well to pick up the threads of the story back in Africa:

"It didn't take David Jamieson long, once his brother had left the little hospital, to begin wondering what was behind the damnable devil-drums pounding unceasingly from the other side of the lake. Nubo, the black male-nurse who had suffered Darghud's powder thrown in his face, was quick to supply the answer, telling the white Mganga all that had transpired at the time of the witch-doctor's visit.

"David Jamieson had been out in Africa long enough to appreciate the fact that there are plenty of things hidden away in dark corners about which the so-called 'civilized world' knows very little; not the least of these being the power of primitive Black Magic. Also, he remembered now that his brother had first started to complain of his headache shortly after the incident with Darghud. Finally, of course, there was the drumming, which he recognized as being part of the ritual to propitiate injurious Black

Magic! All in all, David Jamieson's knowledge was sufficient, at his earliest opportunity, to see him seated in a bark canoe between two trusted natives, skimming across Lake Ngami in what he hoped was the direction of the M'bulus' thorn- and marsh-bush bomas. He took with him some of a fresh supply of penicillin, just in from Livingstone."

Crow paused again, frowning momentarily as he worked out the best way to relate the remainder of the story.

"Sorry to keep jumping about like this, Dawson, but I'm trying to tell the thing more or less chronologically. Let's see now — yes, we'd best go back to Maurice Jamieson in England.

"The doctor lived with his wife, Muriel, in a cottage just outside Brentwood where he had his practice; but within four days of his return it became plain that his recently contracted affliction was affecting his efficient control of that practice. The pounding headache — remarkably reminiscent in its sustained and regular *throb, throb, throb* of the drums across Lake Ngami — had worsened until its pain was so great it seemed to Jamieson that his head was slowly being crushed in a great vise. The next day he took to his bed, so terrible had the agony in his head become, and on the following morning he called in a fellow doctor to examine him. And yet, that same day, as mysteriously as it had waxed, Jamieson's headache waned and quickly disappeared. Altogether the thing had lasted two weeks.

"The next eight days passed uneventfully, and Maurice Jamieson had almost forgotten about the monstrous pains he had known in his head (which, I might add, he had been sure would be the death of him) when a heavily stamped parcel arrived airmail from Salisbury. The thing came with the morning mail,

and Jamieson unwrapped it wonderingly to find a long, explanatory letter from his brother — and Darghud's doll."

"A doll?" I cried, breaking in on Crow's narrative. "Did you say Darghud's doll?"

"Yes, and I'll get on to that in a minute," Crow continued, ignoring my rude outburst, "but first a word about the parcel.

"Now that package was most odd; more like an entomologist's specimen-box than a parcel proper, with little ventilation holes — you know what I mean? And within the inner container, wrapped most carefully in cotton-wool and with only its head free, was the baked clay and straw doll; with slivers of blue glass for its eyes and with the top of its head painted red. I should mention here that Maurice Jamieson had red hair, and that his eyes were blue. . . .

"The letter accompanying this *outré* object was no less extraordinary, explaining in detail all that David Jamieson had done since learning of his brother's confrontation with the witch-doctor. He had set out in his canoe three days after Maurice's departure, and it had taken him another three days to find the nomadic M'bulus; in the end the drums had led him to them. There in the marshlands he had treated the sick chief, bringing him back 'miraculously' to renewed health in only a day or two. They're incredibly tough people, those marsh-dwellers.

"It was only then that the outpost doctor dared bring up the question of Darghud and the devil-drums and what they meant. Shamefacedly, Notka told him that Darghud was 'killing' the other white Mganga for refusing his request for help — but the chief was also quick to agree that the ritual could now be satisfactorily ended with no harm done. Darghud, disappointed and angry, was made to produce the doll — into the clay body of

which he had ground the beetle containing the white Mganga's 'aura' or essence — and also to call a halt to the drumming. Just how he had managed to 'magic' the beetle out of the resin is something I don't suppose anyone will ever know.

"A cord had been twined about the doll's painted head, with two flat wooden discs the size of pennies attached at the temples. Every day Darghud had been turning the discs, tightening the cord, until eventually the head would have been quite squashed! Of course, Jamieson carefully removed the discs and cord immediately — and the point I make is this: *that at exactly the same time he freed the doll's head, five thousand miles away in England his brother's headache began to lift!*"

"Coincidence," I said, feeling more than a little disappointed. It was, after all, a common enough tale.

"Coincidence? Perhaps — but there's more to come. . . .

"Of course, being a stoic sort of chap, Dr. Maurice Jamieson came to the same conclusion as yourself, Dawson — nothing personal intended, you understand. He gave the doll to his wife and thought no more about it. Muriel, however, was an entirely different kettle of fish. She was a superstitious soul, and even if she did fancy that all this was just a bit too much like mumbo-jumbo — well, what harm in taking precautions?

"She'd got this idea right from the start, you see — from the moment she saw Darghud's doll and learned the story behind it — for she simply didn't consider the little effigy of her husband to be *strong* enough! The doll was too frail; it wouldn't last a lifetime. And what if the thing really was, well, *linked* to Maurice in some way? What, she morbidly wondered, would be happening to her husband while Darghud's doll slowly disintegrated?

“Which was why, one night a short while later, she did what she did. . . . And that was the end of that!” Crow snapped his fingers in sharp definition of finality.

I waited a moment and then said: “Well, go on, Titus, finish it off. What did Muriel Jamieson do?”

Crow gazed at me a few seconds longer, sighed, and then continued: “I thought you might have guessed it, Dawson. . . .” He swilled the brandy round in the bottom of his glass.

“Well?” I prompted him.

He sighed again. “Well, one hour after Muriel Jamieson *attended* to the doll, when she went to her husband’s study with a cup of coffee, she found him dead at his desk. His face was blue, his eyes were bulging, and his tongue was lolling out.”

“Eh?” I jumped at his abrupt delivery, staring in unquiet fascination across the space between us. “Dead? Like . . . that? But I thought you said that she was going to take some sort of precautionary measure? I don’t follow you, Crow.”

Yet again my host sighed. “I was hoping to spare myself the telling of the more unpleasant details,” he said.

“Well, come on, come on,” I was beginning to get impatient. “How did he die? What was it all about?”

“You remember I told you how Jamieson’s hobby was entomology, and how he used a type of quick-setting, artificial resin to — ”

“My God!” I burst out, the horrible answer standing out in my mind’s eye with sudden, startling clarity.

“That’s right,” Crow nodded his tawny head in grim affirmation. “When Jamieson’s doctor signed his death certificate, he said it was probably ‘a bug’ Jamieson picked up in Africa — causing first the prolonged headache, then the fatal, terribly swift

respiratory trouble ending in asphyxia. Funny that he should blame it on 'a bug,' eh?"

Crow paused, leaning over to top up my glass again before getting on with it. "Quite naturally, Mrs. Jamieson was a bit crazy for a good eighteen months after her husband's death — she more than half blamed herself, you see? And yet the final straw was not the doctor's death in itself. No, the thing that really put the cap on it all was what happened a few days *after* Jamieson died."

"Eh? Something happened soon after his death?" I needlessly repeated the occultist's words.

"Yes," he affirmed, quite matter-of-factly now that he had it almost all told. "For it was then, in an agony of doubt and horror, that Muriel Jamieson took the doll in its resin coffin and burned it to ashes in the open-hearth fire in her living-room. The resin burned like celluloid. She figured 'out of sight, out of mind,' you know?"

"And that evening, when the will was read, it was discovered that Maurice Jamieson had elected, in the event of his demise, *that the disposal of his body be carried out by cremation!*"

Somehow or other, I intend to use Crow's story!

Born of the Winds

I

Consider: I am, or was, a meteorologist of some note — a man whose interests and leanings have always been away from fantasy and the so-called “supernatural” — and yet now I believe in a wind that blows between the worlds, and in a Being which inhabits that wind, striding in feathery cirrus and shrieking lightning storm alike across icy Arctic heavens.

Just how such an utter *contradiction* of beliefs could come about I will now attempt to explain, for I alone possess all of the facts. If I am wrong in what I more than suspect — if what has gone before has been nothing but a monstrous chain of coincidence confused by horrific hallucination — then with luck I might yet return out of this white wilderness to the sanity of the world I knew. But if I am right, and I fear that I am horribly right, then I am done for, and this manuscript will stand as my testimonial of a hitherto all-but-unrecognized plane of existence . . . and of its *inhabitant*, whose like may only be found in legends whose sources date back geological eons into Earth’s dim and terrible infancy.

My involvement with this thing has come about all in the space of a few months, for it was just over two months ago, fairly early in August, that I first came to Navissa, Manitoba, on what was to have been a holiday of convalescence following a debilitating chest complaint.

Since meteorology serves me both as hobby and means of support, naturally I brought some of my "work" with me; not physically, for my books and instruments are many, but locked in my head were a score of little problems beloved of the meteorologist. I brought certain of my notebooks, too, in which to make jottings or scribble observations on the almost Arctic conditions of the region as the mood might take me. Canada offers a wealth of interest to one whose life revolves about the weather: the wind and rain, the clouds, and the storms that seem to spring from them.

In Manitoba on a clear night, not only is the air sweet, fresh, sharp, and conducive to the strengthening of weakened lungs, but the stars stare down in such crystal clarity that at times a man might try to pluck them out of the firmament. It is just such a night now — though the glass is far down, and I fear that soon it may snow — but warm as I am in myself before my stove, still my fingers feel the awesome cold of the night outside, for I have removed my gloves to write.

Navissa, until fairly recently, was nothing more than a trail camp, one of many to expand out of humble beginnings as a trading post into a full-blown town. Lying not far off the old Olassie Trail, Navissa is quite close to deserted, ill-fated Stillwater; but more of Stillwater later. . . .

I stayed at the judge's house, a handsome brick affair with a raised log porch and chalet-style roof, one of Navissa's few truly modern buildings, standing on that side of the town toward the neighboring hills. Judge Andrews is a retired New Yorker of independent means, an old friend of my father, a widower whose habits in the later years of his life have inclined towards the

reclusive; being self-sufficient, he bothers no one, and in turn he is left to his own devices. Something of a professional anthropologist all his life, the judge now studies the more obscure aspects of that science here in the thinly populated North. It was Judge Andrews himself, on learning of my recent illness, who so kindly invited me to spend this period of convalescence with him in Navissa, though by then I was already well on the way to recovery.

Not that his invitation gave me licence to intrude upon the judge's privacy. It did not. I would do with myself what I would, keeping out of his way as much as possible. Of couse, no such arrangement was specified, but I was aware that this was the way the judge would want it.

I had free run of the house, including the old gentleman's library, and it was there one afternoon early in the final fortnight of my stay that I found the several works of Samuel R. Bridgeman, an English professor of anthropology whose mysterious death had occurred only a few dozen miles or so north of Navissa.

Normally such a discovery would have meant little to me, but I had heard that certain of Bridgeman's theories had made him something of an outcast among others of his profession; there had been among his beliefs some which belonged in no way to the scientific. Knowing Judge Andrews to be a man who liked his facts straight on the line, undistorted by whim or fancy, I wondered what there could be in the eccentric Bridgeman's works that prompted him to display them upon his shelves.

In order to ask him this very question, I was on my way from the small library room to Judge Andrews's study when I saw, letting herself out of the house, a distinguished-looking though patently nervous woman whose age seemed rather difficult to

gauge. Despite the trimness of her figure and the comparative youthfulness of her skin, her hair was quite gray. She had plainly been very attractive, perhaps even beautiful, in youth. She did not see me, or if she did glimpse me where I stood, then her agitated condition did not admit of it. I heard her car pull away.

In the doorway of the judge's study I formed my question concerning Bridgeman's books.

"Bridgeman?" the old man repeated me, glancing up sharply from where he sat at his desk.

"Just those books of his, in the library," I answered, entering the room proper. "I shouldn't have thought that there'd be much for you, Judge, in Bridgeman's work."

"Oh? I didn't know you were interested in anthropology, David?"

"Well, no, I'm not really. It's just that I remember hearing a thing or two about this Bridgeman, that's all."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Eh? Why, certainly! Should there be more?"

"Hmm," he mused. "No, nothing much — coincidence. You see, the lady who left a few moments ago was Lucille Bridgeman, Sam's widow. She's staying at the Nelson."

"Sam?" I was immediately interested. "You knew him then?"

"I did, fairly intimately, though that was many years ago. More recently I've read his books. Did you know that he died quite close by here?"

I nodded. "Yes, in peculiar circumstances I gather?"

"That's so, yes." He frowned again, moving in his chair in what I took to be agitation.

I waited for a moment, and then when it appeared that the

judge intended to say no more, I asked, "And now?"

"Hmm?" His eyes were far away even though they looked at me. They quickly focused. "Now — nothing . . . and I'm rather busy!" He put on his spectacles and turned his attention to a book.

I grinned ruefully, inclined my head and nodded. Being fairly intimate with the old man's moods, I knew what his taciturn, rather abrupt dismissal had meant: "If you want to know more, then you must find out for yourself!" And what better way to discover more of this little mystery, at least initially, than to read Samuel R. Bridgeman's books? That way I should at least learn something of the man.

As I turned away, the judge called to me: "Oh, and David — I don't know what preconceptions you may have formed of Sam Bridgeman and his work, but as for myself . . . near the end of a lifetime, I'm no closer now than I was fifty years ago to being able to say what *is* and what *isn't*. At least Sam had the courage of his convictions!"

What was I to make of that? — and how to answer it? I simply nodded and went out of the room, leaving the judge alone with his books and his thoughts. . . .

That same afternoon found me again in the library, with a volume of Bridgeman's on my lap. There were three of his books in all, and I had discovered that they contained many references to Arctic and near-Arctic regions, to their people, their gods, superstitions, and legends. Still pondering what little I knew of the English professor, these were the passages that primarily drew my attention: Bridgeman had written of these northern parts, and he had died here — mysteriously! No less mysterious, his widow

was here now, twenty years after his demise, in a highly nervous if not actually distraught state. Moreover, that kindly old family friend Judge Andrews seemed singularly reticent with regard to the English anthropologist, and apparently the judge did not entirely disagree with Bridgeman's controversial theories.

But what were those theories? If my memory served me well, then they had to do with certain Indian and Eskimo legends concerning a god of the Arctic winds.

At first glance there seemed to be little in the professor's books to show more than a normally lively and entertaining anthropological and ethnic interest in such legends, though the author seemed to dwell at unnecessary length on Gaoh and Hotoru, air-elementals of the Iroquois and Pawnee respectively, and particularly upon Negafok, the Eskimo cold weather spirit. I could see that he was trying to tie such myths in with the little-known legend of the Wendigo, of which he seemed to deal far too positively.

"The Wendigo," Bridgeman wrote, "is the avatar of a Power come down the ages from forgotten gulfs of immemorial lore; this great *Tornasuk* is none other than Ithaqua Himself, the Wind-Walker, and the very sight of Him means a freezing and inescapable death for the unfortunate observer. Lord Ithaqua, perhaps the very greatest of the mythical air-elementals, made war against the Elder Gods in the Beginning; for which ultimate treason He was banished to frozen Arctic and interplanetary heavens to 'Walk the Winds Forever' through fantastic cycles of time and to fill the *Esquimaux* with dread, eventually earning His terrified worship and His sacrifices. None but such worshipers may look upon Ithaqua — for others to see Him is certain death! He is as a dark outline against the sky, anthropomorphic, a

manlike yet bestial silhouette, striding both in low icy mists and high stratocumulus, gazing down upon the affairs of men with carmine stars for eyes!"

Bridgeman's treatment of the more conventional mythological figures was less romantic; he remained solidly within the framework of accepted anthropology. For example:

"The Babylonian storm-god, Enlil, was designated 'Lord of the Winds.' Mischievous and mercurial in temperament, he was seen by the superstitious peoples of the land to walk in hurricanes and sand-devils. . . ." Or, in yet more traditional legend: "Teuton mythology shows Thor as being the god of thunder; when thunderstorms boiled and the heavens roared, people knew that what they heard was the sound of Thor's war-chariot clattering through the vaults of heaven."

Again, I could not help but find it noticeable that while the author here poked a sort of fun at these classical figures of mythology, he had *not* done so when he wrote of Ithaqua. Similarly, he was completely dry and matter-of fact in his descriptive treatment of an illustration portraying the Hittite god-of-the-storm, Tha-thka, photographed from his carved representation upon a baked clay tablet excavated in the Toros Mountains of Turkey. More, he compared Tha-thka with Ithaqua of the Snows, declaring that he found parallels in the two deities other than the merely phonetical similarity of their names.

Ithaqua, he pointed out, had left webbed tracks in the Arctic snows, tracks which the old *Esquimaux* tribes feared to cross; and Tha-thka (carved in a fashion very similar to the so-called "Amarna style" of Egypt, to mix ethnic art groups) was shown in the photograph as having star-shaped eyes of a rare, dark carnelian . . . and webbed feet! Professor Bridgeman's argument

for connection here seemed valid, even sound, yet I could see how such an argument might very well anger established anthropologists of "the Old School." How, for instance, might one equate a god of the ancient Hittites with a deity of comparatively modern Eskimos? Unless of course one was to remember that in a certain rather fanciful mythology Ithaqua had only been banished to the North following an abortive rebellion against the Elder Gods. Could it be that *before* that rebellion the Wind-Walker strode the high currents and tides of atmospheric air over Ur of the Chaldees and ancient Khem, perhaps even prior to those lands being named by their first inhabitants? Here I laughed at my own fancies, conjured by what the writer had written with such assumed authority, and yet my laughter was more than a trifle strained, for I found a certain cold logic in Bridgeman that made even his wildest statement seem merely a calm, studied exposition. . . .

And there were, certainly, wild statements.

The slimmest of the three books was full of them, and I knew after reading only its first few pages that this must be the source of those flights of fancy which had caused Bridgeman's erstwhile colleagues to desert him. Yet without a doubt the book was by far the most interesting of the three, written almost in a fervor of mystical allusion with an abundance — a *plethora* — of obscure hints suggestive of half-discernible worlds of awe, wonder, and horror bordering and occasionally impinging upon our very own.

I found myself completely enthralled. It seemed plain to me that behind all the hocus-pocus there was a great mystery here — one which, like an iceberg, showed only its tip — and I determined not to be satisfied with anything less than a complete verification of the facts concerning what I had started to think of

as "the Bridgeman case." After all, I seemed to be ideally situated to conduct such an investigation: this was where the professor had died, the borderland of that region in which he had alleged at least one of his mythological beings to exist; and Judge Andrews, provided I could get him to talk, must be something of an authority on the man; and, possibly my best line of research yet, Bridgeman's widow herself was here now in this very town.

Just why this determination to dabble should have so enthused me I still cannot say; unless it was the way that Tha-thka, which Being Bridgeman had equated with Ithaqua, was shown upon the Toros Mountains tablet as walking splayfooted through a curious mixture of cumulonimbus and nimbostratus — cloud formations which invariably presage snow and violent thunderstorms! The ancient sculptor of that tablet had certainly gauged the Wind-Walker's domain well, giving the mythical creature something of solidarity in my mind, though it was still far easier for me to accept those peculiar clouds of ill omen than the Being striding among them. . . .

II

It was something of a shock for me to discover, when finally I thought to look at my wristwatch, that Bridgeman's books had kept me busy all through the afternoon and it was now well into evening. I found that my eyes had started to ache with the strain of reading as it grew darker in the small library room. I put on the light and would have returned to the books yet again but for hearing, at the outer door of the house, a gentle knocking. The library door was slightly ajar so that I could hear the judge answering the knocking and his gruff welcome. I was sure that the voice that

answered him was that of Bridgeman's widow, for it was vibrant with a nervous agitation as the visitor entered the house and went with the judge to his study. Well, I had desired to meet her; this seemed the perfect opportunity to introduce myself.

Yet at the open door to the judge's study I paused, then quickly stepped back out of sight. It seemed that my host and his visitor were engaged in some sort of argument. He had just answered to some unheard question: "Not *me*, my dear, that is out of the question. . . . But if you insist upon this folly, then I'm sure I can find someone to help you. God knows I'd come with you myself — even on this wild goose chase you propose, and despite the forecast of heavy snow — but . . . my dear, I'm an old man. My eyes are no good any more; my limbs are no longer as strong as they used to be. I'm afraid that this old body might let you down at the worst possible time. It's bad country north of here when the snows come."

"Is it simply that, Jason," she answered him in her nervous voice, "or is it really that you believe I'm a madwoman? That's what you as good as called me when I was here earlier."

"You must forgive me for that, Lucille, but let's face it — that story you tell is simply . . . *fantastic!* There's no positive proof that the boy headed this way at all, just this premonition of yours."

"The story I told you was the truth, Jason! As for my 'premonition,' well, I've brought you proof! Look at this ——"

There was a pause before the judge spoke again. Quietly he asked, "But what is this thing, Lucille? Let me get my glass. Hmm — I can see that it depicts ——"

"*No!*" her cry, shrill and loud, cut him off. "No, don't mention *Them*, and please don't say His name!" The hysterical em-

phasis she placed on certain words was obvious, but she sounded calmer when, a few seconds later, she continued: "As for what it is —" I heard a metallic clinking, like a coin dropped on the tabletop, "just keep it here in the house. You will see for yourself. It was discovered clenched in Sam's right hand when they — when they found his poor, broken body."

"All that was twenty years ago ——" the judge said, then paused again before asking: "Is it gold?"

"Yes, but of unknown manufacture. I've shown it to three or four experts over the years, and always the same answer. It is a very ancient thing, but from no known or recognizable culture. Only the fact that it is made of gold saves it from being completely alien! And even the gold is . . . not quite right. Kirby has one, too."

"Oh?" I could hear the surprise in the judge's voice. "And where did he get it? Why, just looking at this thing under the glass, I should have taken it for granted — even knowing nothing of it — that it's as rare as it's old!"

"I believe they are very rare indeed, surviving from an age before all earthly ages. Feel how cold it is. It has a chill like the ocean floor, and if you try to warm it . . . but try it for yourself. I can tell you now, though, that it will not *stay* warm. And I know what that means. . . .

"Kirby received his in the mail some months ago, in the summer. We were at home in Mérida, in Yucatán. As you know, I settled there after — after —"

"Yes, yes I know. But who would want to send the boy such a thing — and why?"

"I believe it was meant as — as a *reminder*, that's all — as a means to awaken in him all I have worked to keep dormant. I've

already told you about . . . about Kirby, about his strange ways even as a baby. I thought they would leave him as he grew older. I was wrong. That last month before he vanished was the worst. It was after he received the talisman through the mail. Then, three weeks ago, he — he just packed a few things and ——” She paused for a moment, I believed to compose herself, for an emotional catch had developed in her voice. I felt strangely moved.

“— As to who sent it to him, that’s something I can’t say. I can only guess, but the package carried the Navissa postmark! That’s why I’m here.”

“The Navissa —” The judge seemed astounded. “But who would there be here to remember something that happened twenty years ago? And who, in any case, would want to make a gift of such a rare and expensive item to a complete stranger?”

The answer when it came was so low that I had difficulty making it out:

“There must have been *others*, Jason! Those people in Stillwater weren’t the only ones who called Him master. Those worshipers of His — they still exist — they must! I believe it was one of them, carrying out his master’s orders. As for where it came from in the first place, why, where else but ——”

“No, Lucille, that’s quite impossible,” the judge cut her off. “Something I really can’t allow myself to believe. If such things could be ——”

“A madness the world could not face?”

“Yes, exactly!”

“Sam used to say the same thing. Nonetheless he sought the horror out, and brought me here with him, and then ——”

“Yes, Lucille, I know what you believe happened then, but ——”

“No buts, Jason — I want my son back. Help me, if you will, or don’t help me. It makes no difference. I’m determined to find him, and I’ll find him here, somewhere, I know it. If I have to, then I’ll search him out alone, by myself, before it’s too late!” Her voice had risen again, hysterically.

“No, there’s no need for that,” the old man cut in placatingly. “First thing tomorrow I’ll find someone to help you. And we can get the Mounties from Nelson in on the job, too. They have a winter camp at Fir Valley only a few miles out of Navissa. I’ll be able to get them on the telephone first thing in the morning. I’ll need to, for the telephone will probably go out with the first bad snow.”

“And you’ll definitely find someone to help me personally — someone trustworthy?”

“That’s my word. In fact I already know of one young man who might be willing. Of a very good family — and he’s staying with me right now. You can meet him tomorrow —”

At this point I heard the scrape of chairs and pictured the two rising to their feet. Suddenly ashamed of myself to be standing there eavesdropping, I quickly returned to the library and pulled the door shut behind me. After some little time, during which the lady departed, I went again to Judge Andrews’s study, this time tapping at the shut door and entering at his word. I found the old man worriedly pacing the floor.

He stopped pacing as I entered. “Ah, David. Sit down, please, there’s something I would like to ask you.” He seated himself, shuffling awkwardly in his chair. “It’s difficult to know where to begin —”

“Begin with Samuel R. Bridgeman,” I answered. “I’ve had

time to read his books now. Frankly, I find myself very interested."

"But how did you know —"

Thinking back on my eavesdropping, I blushed a little as I answered, "I've just seen Mrs. Bridgeman leaving. I'm guessing that it's her husband, or perhaps the lady herself, you want to talk to me about."

He nodded, picking up from his desk a golden medallion some two inches across its face, fingering its bas-relief work before answering. "Yes, you're right, but —"

"Yes?"

He sighed heavily in answer, then said, "Ah, well, I suppose I'll have to tell you the whole story, or what I know of it — that's the least I can do if I'm to expect your help." He shook his head. "That poor, demented woman!"

"Is she not quite . . . *right*, then?"

"Nothing like that at all," he answered hastily, gruffly. "She's as sane as I am. It's just that she's a little, well, *disturbed*."

He then told me the whole of the thing, a story that lasted well into the night. I reproduce here what I can remember of his words. They formed an almost unbroken narrative that I listened to in silence to its end, a narrative which only served to strengthen that resolution of mine to follow this mystery down to a workable conclusion.

"As you are aware," the judge began, "I was a friend of Sam Bridgeman's in our younger days. How this friendship came about is unimportant, but I also knew Lucille before they married, and that is why she now approaches me for help after all these

years. It is pure coincidence that I live now in Navissa, so close to where Sam died.

“Even in those early days Sam was a bit of a rebel. Of the orthodox sciences, including anthropology and ethnology, few interested Sam in their accepted forms. Dead and mythological cities, lands with exotic names and strange gods were ever his passion. I remember how he would sit and dream — of Atlantis and Mu, Ephiroth and Khurdisan, G’harne and lost Leng, R’lyeh and Theem’hdra, forgotten worlds of antique legend and myth — when by rights he should have been studying and working hard toward his future. And yet . . . that future came to nothing in the end.

“Twenty-six years ago he married Lucille, and because he was fairly well-to-do by then, having inherited a sizable fortune, he was able to escape a working life as we know it to turn his full attention to those ideas and ideals most dear to him. In writing his books, particularly his last book, he alienated himself utterly from colleagues and acknowledged authorities alike in those specific sciences upon which he lavished his ‘imagination.’ That was how they saw his — fantasies? — as the product of a wild imagination set free to wreak havoc among all established orders, scientific and theological included.

“Eventually he became looked upon as a fool, a naive clown who based his crazed arguments in Blavatsky, in the absurd theories of Scott-Elliot, in the insane epistles of Eibon and the warped translations of Harold Hadley Copeland, rather than in prosaic but proven historians and scientists. . . .

“When exactly, or why, Sam became interested in the theogony of these northern parts — particularly in certain beliefs of the Indians and half-breeds, and in Eskimo legends of yet more

northerly regions — I do not know, but in the end he himself began to *believe* them. He was especially interested in the legend of the snow- or wind-god, Ithaqua, variously called 'Wind-Walker,' 'Death-Walker,' 'Strider in the Star-Spaces,' and others, a being who supposedly walks in the freezing boreal winds and in the turbulent atmospheric currents of far northern lands and adjacent waters.

"As fortune — or misfortune — would have it, his decision to pay this region a visit coincided with problems of an internal nature in some few of the villages around here. There were strange undercurrents at work. Secret semireligious groups had moved into the area, in many cases apparently vagrant, here to witness and worship at a 'Great Coming!' Strange, certainly, but can you show me any single region of this earth of ours that does not have its crackpot organizations, religious or otherwise? Mind you, there has always been a problem with that sort of thing here. . . .

"Well, a number of the members of these so-called esoteric groups were generally somewhat more intelligent than the average Indian, half-breed, or Eskimo; they were mainly New Englanders, from such decadent Massachusetts towns as Arkham, Dunwich, and Innsmouth.

"The Mounties at Nelson saw no threat, however, for this sort of thing was common here; one might almost say that over the years there has been a surfeit of it! On this occasion it was believed that certain occurrences in and about Stillwater and Navissa had drawn these rather polyglot visitors, for five years earlier there had indeed occurred a very large number of peculiar and still unsolved disappearances, to say nothing of a handful of inexplicable deaths at the same time.

“I’ve done a little research myself into just what happened, though I’m still very uncertain, but conjecture aside, hard figures and facts are — surprising? — no, they are downright disturbing!

“For instance, the *entire population* of one town, Stillwater, vanished overnight! You need not take my word for it — research it for yourself. The newspapers were full of it.

“Well, now, add to a background like this a handful of tales concerning giant webbed footprints in the snow, stories of strange altars to forbidden gods in the woods, and a creature that comes on the wings of the winds to accept living sacrifices — and remember, please, that all such appear time and again in the history and legends of these parts — and you’ll agree it’s little wonder that the area has attracted so many weird types over the years.

“Not that I remember Sam Bridgeman as being a ‘weird type,’ you understand; but it was exactly this sort of thing that brought him here when, after five years of quiet, the cycle of hysterical superstition and strange worship was again at its height. That was how things stood when he arrived here, and he brought his wife with him. . . .

“The snow was already deep to the north when they came, but that did nothing at all to deter Sam; he was here to probe the old legends, and he would never be satisfied until he had done just that. He hired a pair of French-Canadian guides, swarthy characters of doubtful backgrounds, to take him and Lucille in search of . . . of what? Dreams and myths, fairy tales and ghost stories?

“They trekked north, and despite the uncouth looks of the guides, Sam soon decided that his choice of these two men had been a good one; they seemed to know the region quite well. In-

deed, they appeared to be somehow, well, cowed out in the snows, different again from when Sam had found them, drunk and fighting in a Navissa bar. But then again, in all truth, he had had little choice but to hire these two, for with the five-year cycle of strangeness at its peak few of Navissa's regular inhabitants would have ventured far from their homes. And indeed, when Sam asked his guides why they seemed so nervous, they told him it was all to do with 'the season.' Not, they explained, the winter season, but that of the strange myth-cycle. Beyond that they would say nothing, which only excited Sam's curiosity all the more — particularly since he had noticed that their restlessness grew apace the farther north they trekked.

"Then, one calm white night, with the tents pitched and a bright wood fire kindled, one of the guides asked Sam just what it was that he sought in the snow. Sam told him, mentioning the stories of Ithaqua the Snow-Thing, but got no further; for upon hearing the Wind-Walker's name spoken, the French Canadian simply refused to listen any more. Instead, he went off early to his tent where he was soon overheard muttering and arguing in a frightened and urgent voice with his companion. The next morning, when Sam roused himself, he discovered to his horror that he and his wife were alone, that the guides had run off and deserted them! Not only this, but they had taken all the provisions with them. The Bridgemans had only their tent, the clothing they stood in, their sleeping bags and personal effects. They had not even a box of matches with which to light a fire.

"Still, their case did not appear to be completely hopeless. They had had fair weather so far, and they were only three days and nights out from Navissa. But their trail had been anything but a straight one, so that when they set about making a return

journey it was pure guesswork on Sam's part the correct direction in which to head. He knew something of the stars, however; and when the cold night came down, he was able to say with some certainty that they headed south.

"And yet lonely and vulnerable though they now felt, they had been aware even on the first day that they were not truly alone. On occasion they had crossed strange tracks, freshly made by furtive figures that melted away into the firs or banks of snow whenever Sam called out to them across the wintry wastes. On the second morning, soon after setting out from their camp in the lee of tall pines, they came upon the bodies of their erstwhile guides; they had been horribly tortured and mutilated before dying. In the pockets of one of the bodies Sam found matches, and that night — though by now they knew the pangs of hunger — they at least had the warmth of a fire to comfort them. But ever in the flickering shadows, just outside the field of vision afforded by the leaping flames, there were those furtive figures, silent in the snow, watching and . . . waiting?

"They talked, Sam and Lucille, huddled together in the door of their tent before the warming fire, whispering of the dead guides and how and why those men had come to such terrible ends; and they shivered at the surrounding shadows and the shapes that shifted within them. This country, Sam reasoned, must indeed be the territory of Ithaqua the Wind-Walker. At times, when the influence of old rites and mysteries was strongest, then the snow-god's worshipers — the Indians, half-breeds, and perhaps others less obvious and from farther parts — would gather here to attend His ceremonies. To the outsider, the unbeliever, this entire area must be forbidden, taboo! The guides had been outsiders . . . Sam and Lucille were outsiders, too. . . .

"It must have been about this time that Lucille's nerves began

to go, which would surely be understandable. The intense cold and the white wastes stretching out in all directions, broken only very infrequently by the boles and snow-laden branches of firs and pines — the hunger eating at her insides now — those half-seen figures lurking ever on the perimeter of her vision and consciousness — the terrible knowledge that what had happened to the guides could easily happen again — and the fact, no longer hidden by her husband, that she and Sam were — lost! Though they were making south, who could say that Navissa lay in their path, or even that they would ever have the strength to make it back to the town?

“Yes, I think that at that stage she must have become for the most part delirious, for certainly the things she ‘remembers’ as happening from that time onwards were delusion-inspired, despite their detail. And God knows that poor Sam must have been in a similar condition. At any rate, on the third night, unable to light a fire because the matches had somehow got damp, events took an even stranger turn.

“They had managed to pitch the tent, and Sam had gone inside to do whatever he could towards making it comfortable. Lucille, as the night came down more fully, was outside moving about to keep warm. She suddenly cried out to Sam that she could see distant fires at the four points of the compass. Then, in another moment, she screamed, and there came a rushing wind that filled the tent and brought an intense, instantaneous drop in temperature. Stiffly, and yet as quickly as he could, Sam stumbled out of the tent to find Lucille fallen to the snow. She could not tell him what had happened, could only mumble incoherently of ‘something in the sky!’

“... God only knows how they lived through that night. Lucille’s recollections are blurred and indistinct; she believes now

that she was in any case more dead than alive. Three days and nights in that terrible white waste, wholly without food and for the greater part of the time without even the warmth of a fire. But on the morning of the next day —

“Amazingly everything had changed for the better overnight. Apparently their fears — that if they did not first perish from exposure they would die at the hands of the unknown murderers of the two guides — had been unfounded. Perhaps, Sam conjectured, they had somehow managed to pass out of the forbidden territory; and now that they were no longer trespassers, as it were, they were eligible for whatever help Ithaqua’s furtive worshipers could give them. Certainly that was the way things seemed to be, for in the snow beside their tent they found tinned soups, matches, a kerosene cooker similar to the one stolen by the unfortunate guides, a pile of branches, and finally, a cryptic note which said, simply: ‘Navissa lies seven miles to the southeast.’ It was as if Lucille’s vision of the foregoing night had been an omen of good fortune, as if Ithaqua Himself had looked down and decided that the two lost and desperate human beings deserved another chance. . . .

“By midday, with hot soup inside them, warmed and rested, having slept the morning through beside a fire, they were ready to complete their return journey to Navissa — or so they thought!

“Shortly after they set out, a light storm sprang up through which they pressed on until they came to a range of low, pine-covered hills. Navissa, Sam reckoned, must lie just beyond the hills. Despite the strengthening storm and falling temperature, they decided to fight on while they had the strength for it, but no sooner had they started to climb than nature seemed to set all her elements against them. I have checked the records and that night was one of the worst this region had known in many years.

“It soon became obvious that they could not go on through the teeth of the storm but must wait it out. Just as Sam had made up his mind to pitch camp, they entered a wood of thick firs and pines; and since this made the going easier, they pressed on a little longer. Soon, however, the storm picked up to such an unprecedented pitch that they knew they must take shelter there and then. In these circumstances they came across that which seemed a veritable haven from the storm.

“At first, seen through the whipping trees and blinding snow, the thing looked like a huge squat cabin, but as they approached it they could see that it was in fact a great raised platform of sorts, sturdily built of logs. The snow, having drifted up deeply on three sides of this edifice, had given it the appearance of a flat-roofed cabin. The fourth side being free of snow, the whole formed a perfect shelter into which they crept out of the blast. There, beneath that huge log platform whose purpose they were too weary even to guess at, Sam lit the kerosene stove and warmed some soup. They felt cheered by the timely discovery of this refuge, and since after some hours the storm seemed in no way about to abate, they made down their sleeping bags and settled themselves in for the night. Both of them fell instantly asleep.

“And it was later that night that disaster struck. How, in what manner Sam died, must always remain a matter for conjecture; but I believe that Lucille saw him die, and the sight of it must have temporarily broken her already badly weakened nerves. Certainly the things which she *believes* she saw, and one thing in particular which she believes happened that night, never could have been. God forbid!

“That part of Lucille’s story, anyway, is composed of fragmentary mental images hard to define and even harder to put into common words. She has spoken of beacon fires burning in the

night, of a 'congregation at Ithaqua's altar,' of an evil, ancient Eskimo chant issuing from a hundred adulatory throats — and of that which *answered* that chant, drawn down from the skies by the call of its worshipers. . . .

"I will go into no details of what she 'remembers' except to repeat that Sam died, and that then, as I see it, his poor wife's tortured mind must finally have broken. It seems certain, though, that even after the . . . horror . . . she must have received help from someone; she could not possibly have covered even a handful of miles in her condition on foot and alone — and yet she was found *here*, near Navissa, by certain of the town's inhabitants.

"She was taken to a local doctor, who was frankly astounded that, frozen to the marrow as she was, she had not died of exposure in the wastes. It was a number of weeks before she was well enough to be told of Sam, how he had been found dead, a block of human ice out in the snows.

"And when she pressed them, then it came out about the condition of his body, how strangely torn and mangled it had been, as if ravaged by savage beasts, or as if it had fallen from a great height, or perhaps a combination of both. The official verdict was that he must have stumbled over some high cliff onto sharp rocks, and that his body had subsequently been dragged for some distance over the snow by wolves. This latter fitted with the fact that while his body showed all the signs of a great fall, there were no high places in the immediate vicinity. Why the wolves did not devour him remains unknown."

Thus ended the judge's narrative, and though I sat for some three minutes waiting for him to continue, he did not do so. In the end I said, "And she believes that her husband was killed by . . . ?

“That Ithaqua killed him? — Yes, and she believes in rather worse things, if you can imagine that.” Hurriedly then he went on, giving me no opportunity to question his meaning.

“One or two other things: First, Lucille’s temperature. It has never been quite normal since that time. She tells me medical men are astounded that her body temperature never rises above a level which would be death to anyone else. They say it must be a symptom of severe nervous disorders but are at a loss to reconcile this with her otherwise fairly normal physical condition. And finally this,” he held out the medallion for my inspection.

“I want you to keep it for now. It was found on Sam’s broken body; in fact it was clenched in his hand. Lucille got it with his other effects. She tells me there is — something strange about it. If any, well, *phenomena* really do attach to it, you should notice them. . . .”

I took the medallion and looked at it — at its loathsome bas-relief work, scenes of a battle between monstrous beings which only some genius artist in the throes of madness might conceive — before asking, “And is that all?”

“Yes, I think so — no, wait. There is something else, of course there is. Lucille’s boy, Kirby. He . . . well, in many ways it seems he is like Sam: impetuous, with a love of strange and esoteric lore and legend, a wanderer at heart, I suspect; but his mother has always kept him down, earthbound. At any rate, he’s now run off. Lucille believes that he’s come north. She thinks perhaps that he intends to visit those regions where his father died. Don’t ask me why; I think Kirby must be something of a neurotic where his father is concerned. This may well have come down to him from his mother.

“Anyway, she intends to follow and find him and take him

home again away from here. Of course, if no evidence comes to light to show him positively to be in these parts, then there will be nothing for you to do. But if he really is here somewhere, then it would be a great personal favor to me if you would go with Lucille and look after her when she decides to search him out. Goodness only knows how it might affect her to go again into the snows, with so many bad memories."

"I'll certainly do as you ask, Judge, and gladly," I answered immediately. "Frankly, the more I learn of Bridgeman, the more the mystery fascinates me. There *is* a mystery, you would agree, despite all rationalizations?"

"A mystery?" he pondered my question. "The snows are strange, David, and too much snow and privation can bring fantastic illusions — like the mirages of the desert. In the snow, men may dream while yet awake. And there again, there is that weird five-year cycle of strangeness which definitely affects this region. Myself, I suspect that it all has some quite simple explanation. A mystery? — I say the world is full of mysteries. . . ."

III

That night I experienced my first taste of the weird, the inexplicable, the outré. And that night I further learned that I, too, must be susceptible to the five-year cycle of strangeness; either that, or I had eaten too well before taking to my bed!

There was first the dream of cyclopean submarine cities of mad angles and proportions, which melted into vague but frightful glimpses of the spaces between the stars, through which I seemed to walk or float at speeds many times that of light. Nebulae floated

by like bubbles in wine, and strange constellations expanded before me and dwindled in my wake as I passed through them. This floating, or walking, was accompanied by the sounds of a tremendous striding, like the world-shaking footsteps of some ponderous giant, and there was (of all things) an ether wind that blew about me the scent of stars and shards of shattered planets.

Finally all of these impressions faded to a nothingness, and I was as a mote lost in the darkness of dead eons. Then there came another wind — not the wind that carried the odor of outer immensities or the pollen of blossoming planets — a tangible, shrieking gale-wind that whirled me about and around until I was sick and dizzy and in dread of being dashed to pieces. And I awoke.

I awoke and thought I knew why I had dreamed such a strange dream, a nightmare totally outside anything I had previously known. For out in the night it raged and blew, a storm that filled my room with its roaring until I could almost feel the tiles being lifted from the roof above.

I got out of bed and went to the window, drawing the curtains cautiously and looking out — before stumbling back with my eyes popping and my mouth agape in an exclamation of utter amazement and disbelief. *Outside, the night was as calm as any I ever saw, with the stars gleaming clear and bright and not even a breeze to stir the small firs in the judge's garden!*

As I recoiled — amidst the rush and roar of winds which seemed to have their origin in my very room, even though I could feel no motion of the air and while nothing visibly stirred — I knocked down the golden medallion from where I had left it upon my window ledge. On the instant, as the dull yellow thing clattered to the smooth pine floor, the roaring of the wind was cut off,

leaving a silence that made my head spin with its suddenness. The cacophony of mad winds had not "died away" — quite literally it had been *cut off!*

Shakily I bent to pick the medallion up, noticing that despite the warmth of my room it bore a chill that must have been near to freezing. On impulse I put the thing to my ear. It seemed that just for a second, receding, I could hear as in a sounding shell the rush and roar and hum of winds far, far away, winds blowing beyond the rim of the world!

In the morning, of course, I realized that it had all been a dream, not merely the fantastic submarine and interspatial sequences but also those occurrences following immediately upon my "awakening." Nevertheless, I questioned the judge as to whether he had heard anything odd during the night. He had not, and I was strangely relieved. . . .

Three days later, when it was beginning to look like Lucille Bridgeman's suspicions regarding her son were without basis — this despite all her efforts, and the judge's, to prove the positive presence of Kirby Bridgeman in the vicinity of Navissa — then came word from the Mounties at Fir Valley that a young man answering Kirby's description had indeed been seen. He had been with a mixed crowd of seemingly destitute outsiders and local layabouts camping in crumbling Stillwater. Observers — two aging but inveterate gold-grubbers, out on their last prospecting trip of the year before the bad weather set it — had mentioned seeing him. Though these gnarled prospectors had by no means been made welcome in Stillwater, nonetheless they had noted that this particular young man had appeared to be in a sort of trance or

daze, and that the others with him had seemed to hold him in some kind of reverence; they had been tending to his needs and generally looking after him.

It was this description of the boy's condition (which made it sound rather as if he were not quite right in his head) that determined me to inquire tactfully of his mother about him as soon as the opportunity presented itself. For the last two days, though, I had been studying the handling and maintenance of a vehicle that the judge termed a "snow cat"; a fairly large motorized sledge of very modern design that he had hired for Mrs. Bridgeman from a friend of his in the town. The vehicle seemed a fairly economical affair, capable in suitable conditions of carrying two adults and provisions over snow at a speed of up to twenty miles per hour. It was capable, too, of a somewhat slower speed over more normal terrain. With such a vehicle two people might easily travel 150 miles without refueling, in comparative comfort at that, and over country no automobile could possibly challenge.

The next morning saw us setting out aboard the snow-cat. Though we planned on returning to Navissa every second or third day to refuel, we had sufficient supplies aboard for at least a week. First we headed for Stillwater.

Following a fall of snow during the night, the track that led us to the ghost town was mainly buried beneath a white carpet almost a foot deep, but even so, it was plain that this barely fourth-class road (in places a mere trail) was in extremely poor repair. I recalled the judge telling me that very few people went to Stillwater now, following the strange affair of twenty years gone, and doubtless this accounted for the track's derelict appearance in those places where the wind had blown its surface clean.

In Stillwater we found a constable of the Mounties just prepar-

ing to leave the place for camp at Fir Valley. He had gone to the ghost town specifically to check out the story of the two old prospectors. Introducing himself as Constable McCauley, the Mountie showed us round the town.

Originally the place had been built of stout timbers, with stores and houses and one very ramshackle "saloon" bordering a main street and with lesser huts and habitations set back behind the street facades. Now, however, the main street was grown with grass and weeds beneath the snow, and even the stoutest buildings were quickly falling into dilapidation. The shacks and lesser houses to the rear leaned like old men with the weight of years, and rotten doorposts with their paint long flaked away sagged on every hand, threatening at any moment to collapse and bring down the edifices framing them into the snow. Here and there one or two windows remained, but warped and twisting frames had long since claimed by far the greater number, so that now sharp shards of glass stood up in broken rows from sills like grinning teeth in blackly leering mouths. A stained, tattered curtain flapped moldering threads in the chill midday breeze. Even though the day was fairly bright, there was a definite gloominess about Stillwater, an aura of something *not quite right*, of strange menace, seeming to brood like a mantle of evil about the place.

Overall, and ignoring the fact that twenty years had passed since last it knew habitation, the town seemed to be falling far too quickly into decay, almost as if some elder magic had blighted the place in an effort to return it to its origins. Saplings already stood tall through the snow in the main street; grass and weeds proliferated on window ledges, along facades, and in the black gaps where boards had fallen from the lower storeys of the crumbling buildings.

Mrs. Bridgeman seemed to notice none of this, only that her son was no longer in the town . . . if he had ever been there.

In the largest standing building, a tavern that seemed to have fared better in its battle against decay than the rest of the town, we brewed coffee and heated soups. There, too we found signs of recent, if temporary, habitation, for the floor in one of the rooms was fairly littered with freshly empty cans and bottles. This debris, plus the blackened ashes of a fire built on stones in one corner, stood as plain testimony that the building had been used by that group of unknown persons whose presence the prospectors had reported.

The Mountie mentioned how chill the place was, and at his remark it dawned on me that indeed the tavern seemed colder inside (where by all rights it ought to have been at least marginally warmer) than out in the raw air of the derelict streets. I was about to voice this thought when Mrs. Bridgeman, suddenly paler by far than usual, put down her coffee and stood up from where she sat upon a rickety chair.

She looked first at me — a queer, piercing glance — then at McCauley. “My son was here,” she abruptly said, as if she knew it quite definitely. “Kirby was here!”

The Mountie looked hard at her, then stared about the room in mystification. “There’s some sign that your boy was here, Mrs. Bridgeman?”

She had turned away and for a moment did not answer. She seemed to be listening intently for something far off. “Can’t you hear it?”

Constable McCauley looked at me out of the corner of his eye. He frowned. The room was very still. “Hear what, Mrs. Bridgeman? What is it?”

“Why, the wind!” she answered, her eyes clouded and distant. “The wind blowing way out between the worlds!”

Half an hour we were ready to move again. The Mountie in the meantime had taken me to one side, to ask me if I didn't think the search we planned was just a little bit hazardous considering Mrs. Bridgeman's condition. Plainly he thought she was a bit touched. Perhaps she was! God knows, if what the judge told me was true, the poor woman had enough reason. Being ignorant of her real problem at that time, however, I shrugged her strangeness off, mentioning her relationship with her son as being obsessive out of all proportion to reality. In truth, this was the impression I had already half formed — but it did not explain the *other* thing.

I made no mention of it to the Mountie. For one thing, it was none of his business; and for another, I hardly wanted him thinking that perhaps I, too, was “a bit touched.” It was simply this: in the derelict tavern — when Mrs. Bridgeman had asked, “Can't you hear it?” — I had in fact heard something. At the exact moment of her enquiry, I had put my hand into a pocket of my parka for a pack of cigarettes. My hand had come into contact with that strange golden medallion, and as my fingers closed upon the chill shape, I had felt a thrill as of weird energies, an electric tingle that seemed to energize all my senses simultaneously. I felt the cold of the spaces between the stars; I smelled again, as in my dreams, the scents of unknown worlds; for the merest fraction of a second there opened before me reeling vistas, incredible eons flashing by in a twinkling; and I, too, heard a wind — a howling *sentience* from far beyond the Universe we know!

It had been so momentary, this — vision? — that I thought little more of it. Doubtless my mind, as I touched the medallion,

had conjured in connection with the thing parts of that dream in which it had featured so strongly. That was the only explanation. . . .

I calculate that by 5:00 p.m. we must have been something like fifty miles directly north of Stillwater. It was there, in the lee of a low hill covered by tall conifers whose snow-laden branches bowed almost to the ground, that Mrs. Bridgeman called a halt for the night. Freezing, the snow already had a thin, crisp crust. I set up our two tiny bivouacs beneath a pine whose white branches formed in themselves something of a tent, and there I lit our stove and prepared a meal.

I had decided that it was time tactfully to approach Mrs. Bridgeman regarding those many facets of her story of which I was still ignorant; but then, as if there were not enough of mystery, I was witness to that which brought vividly back to me what the judge had told me of the widow's body temperature.

We had finished our meal, and I had prepared my bivouac for the night, spreading my sleeping bag and packing snow close to the lower outside walls of the tiny tent against freezing drafts. I offered to do the same for Mrs. Bridgeman, but she assured me that she could attend to that herself. For the moment she wanted "a breath of fresh air." That turn of phrase in itself might have been enough to puzzle me (the air could hardly have been fresher!) but in addition she then cast off her parka, standing only in sweater and slacks, before stepping out from under the lowered branches into the sub-zero temperatures of falling night!

Heavily wrapped, still I shivered as I watched her from the sanctuary of our hideaway beneath the tree. For half an hour she simply wandered to and fro over the snow, occasionally glancing

at the sky and then again into the darkening distance. Finally, as I suddenly realized that I was quickly drawing close to freezing while waiting for her to come back to camp, I went stiffly out to her with her parka. She must by now, I believed, be very close to suffering from exposure. Blaming myself that I had not recognized sooner how terrifically cold it was, I came up to her and threw her parka about her shoulders. Imagine my astonishment when she turned with a questioning look, completely at ease and plainly quite comfortable, immensely surprised at my concern!

She must have seen immediately how cold I was. Chiding me that I had not taken greater care to keep warm, she hurried back with me to the bivouacs beneath the tree. There she quickly boiled water and made coffee. She drank none of the hot, reviving fluid herself, however, and I was so astounded at her apparent immunity to the cold that I forgot all about those questions I had intended to ask. Since Mrs. Bridgeman now plainly intended to retire and since my own sleeping bag lay warm and inviting inside my bivouac, I simply finished off the coffee, turned down the stove and lay down for the night.

I was suddenly tired, and the last thing I saw before sleeping was a patch of sky through the branches, illumined by brightly twinkling stars. Perhaps that picture of the heavens, imprinted upon my mind's eye as I fell asleep, colored my dreams. Certainly I dreamed of stars all night long, but they were uneasy dreams. The stars I saw were particularly sentient and paired like strange eyes; they glowed carmine against a moving black background of hideously suggestive design and immense proportions. . . .

In the morning over breakfast — cheese and tomato sandwiches, followed by coffee and fruit juice — I briefly mentioned Mrs. Bridgeman's apparent immunity to the cold, at which she

looked at me with a very wry expression and said, "You may believe me, Mr. Lawton, when I tell you that I would give all of what little I have just once to feel the cold. It is this — *affliction* — of mine, an extremely rare condition which I contracted here in the north. And it has come out in —"

"In Kirby?" I hazarded the guess.

"Yes." She looked at me again, shrewdly this time. "How much did Judge Andrews tell you?"

I could not conceal my embarrassment. "He — he told me of your husband's death, and —"

"What did he say of my son?"

"Very little. He is not the kind of man to gossip idly, Mrs. Bridgeman, and —"

"And you suspect that there might be much to gossip about?" She was suddenly angry.

"I only know that I'm here, helping a woman look for her son, following her instincts and whims without question, as a favor to an old man. To be absolutely truthful, I suspect that there is a great mystery here; and I admit that I am addicted to mysteries, as curious as a cat. But my curiosity is without malice, you must believe that, and my only desire is to help you."

She turned away from me for a moment or two, and I thought she was still angry, but when she turned back her face was much more composed.

"And did the judge not warn you that there would be — danger?"

"Danger? Heavy snow is due, certainly —"

"No, the snow is nothing — I didn't mean the snow. The judge has Sam's books; have you read them?"

"Yes, but what danger can there be in mythology and

folklore?" In fact, I guessed what she was getting at, but better to hear it from her own lips, as she "believed" it and as her husband had "believed" it before her.

"What danger in myths and legends, you ask?" she smiled mirthlessly. "I asked the same question of Sam when he wanted to leave me in Navissa. God, that I'd listened to him! What danger in folklore? I can't tell you directly — not without you thinking me a madwoman, as I'm sure the judge must more than half believe — but I'll tell you this: today we return to Navissa. On the way you can teach me how to drive the snow-cat. I won't take you to horrors you can't conceive."

I tried to argue the point but she would say no more. We decamped in silence, packed the bivouacs and camp utensils aboard the cat, and then, despite a last effort on my part to dissuade her, she demanded that we head directly for Navissa.

For half an hour, traveling fairly slowly, we followed the course of a frozen stream between brooding fir forests whose dark interiors were made darker still by the shrouding snow that covered the upper branches. It was as I turned the snow-cat away from the stream, around a smaller copse of trees to head more nearly south, that I accidentally came upon that which should have gone far towards substantiating Mrs. Bridgeman's hints of terrible dangers.

It was a large depression in the snow, to which I had to react quickly in order to avoid a spill, when we might easily have tumbled directly into it. I halted our machine, and we stepped down to take a closer look at this strangely sunken place in the snow.

Here the drift was deeper, perhaps three or four feet, but in the center of the depression it had been compacted almost to the earth

beneath, as if some great weight had rested there. The size of this concavity must have been almost twenty feet long by seven or eight feet wide, and its shape was something like —

Abruptly the judge's words came back to me — what he had mentioned of the various manifestations of Ithaqua, the Wind-Walker — *and particularly of giant, webbed footprints in the snow!*

But of course that was ridiculous. And yet. . . .

I began to walk round the perimeter of the fantastic depression, only turning when I heard Mrs. Bridgeman cry out behind me. Paler than I had ever seen her before, now she leaned dizzily against the snow-cat, her hand to her throat. I went quickly to her.

"Mrs. Bridgeman?"

"He — *He was here!*" she spoke in a horrified whisper.

"Your son?"

"No, not Kirby — *Him!*" She pointed, staring wide-eyed at the compacted snow of the depression. "Ithaqua, the Wind-Walker — that is His sign. And that means that I may already be too late!"

"Mrs. Bridgeman," I made a half hearted attempt to reason with her, "plainly this depression marks the spot where a number of animals rested during the night. The snow must have drifted about them, leaving this peculiar shape."

"There was no snow last night, Mr. Lawton," she answered, more composed now, "but in any case your explanation is quite impossible. Why, if there had been a number of animals here, surely they would have left tracks in the snow when they moved. Look about you. There are no tracks here! No, this is the footprint of the fiend. The horror was here — and somewhere, at this

very moment, my son is trying to search Him out, helped on by those poor devils that worship Him!”

I saw my chance then to avoid an early return to Navissa. If we went back now, I might never learn the whole story, and I would never be able to face the judge, having let him down. “Mrs. Bridgeman, it’s plain that if we go south now we’re only wasting time. I for one am willing to face whatever danger there may be, though I still can see no such danger. However, if some peril does face Kirby, then we won’t be helping him any by returning to Navissa. It would help, though, if I knew the background story. Some of it I know already, but there must be a lot you can tell me. Now listen, we have enough fuel for about 120 miles more. This is my proposition: that we carry on looking for your son to the north. If we have not found him by the time our fuel reserves are halved, then we head back in a direct line for Navissa. Furthermore, I swear here and now that I’ll never divulge anything you may tell me or anything I may see while you live. Now, then — we’re wasting time. What do you say?”

She hesitated, turning my proposition over in her mind, and as she did so, I saw to the north the spreading of a cloud sheet across the sky and sensed that peculiar change of atmosphere which ever precedes bad weather. Again I prompted her: “The sky is growing more sullen all the time. We’re in for plenty of snow — probably tonight. We really can’t afford to waste time if we want to find Kirby before the worst of the weather sets in. Soon the glass will begin to fall, and —”

“The cold won’t bother Kirby, Mr. Lawton — but you’re right, there’s no time to waste. From now on our breaks must be shorter, and we must try to travel faster. Later today I’ll tell you what I can of . . . of everything. Believe what you will, it makes

little difference, but for the last time I warn you — if we find Kirby, then in all probability we shall also find the utmost horror!”

IV

With regard to the weather, I was right. Having turned again to the north, skirting dense fir forests and crossing frozen streams and low hills, by 10:30 A.M. we were driving through fairly heavy snow. The glass was far down, though mercifully there was little wind. All this time — despite a certainty in my heart that there would be none — nevertheless, I found myself watching out for more of those strange and inexplicable hollows in the snow.

A dense copse where the upper branches interlaced, forming a dark umbrella to hold up a roof of snow, served us for a midday camp. There, while we prepared a hot meal and as we ate, Mrs. Bridgeman began to tell me about her son, about his remarkable childhood and his strange leanings as he grew into a man. Her first revelation, however, was the most fantastic, and plainly the judge had been quite right to suspect that the events of twenty years gone had turned her mind, at least as far as her son was concerned.

“Kirby,” she started without preamble, “is not Sam’s son. I love Kirby, naturally, but he is in no wise a child of love. He was born of the winds. No, don’t interrupt me, I want no rationalizations.

“Can you understand me, Mr. Lawton? I suppose not. Indeed, at first I, too, thought that I was mad, that the whole thing had been a nightmare. I thought so right until the time — until Kirby was born. Then, as he grew up from a baby, I became less sure.

Now I know that I was never mad. It was no nightmare that came to me here in the snow but a monstrous fact! And why not? Are not the oldest religions and legends known to man full of stories of gods lusting after the daughters of men? There *were* giants in the olden times, Mr. Lawton. There still are.

“Do you recall the Wendy-Smith expedition of '33? What do you suppose he found, that poor man, in the fastnesses of Africa? What prompted him to say these words, which I know by heart: ‘There are fabulous legends of star-born creatures who inhabited this Earth many millions of years before Man appeared and who were still here, in certain black places, when he eventually evolved. They are, I am sure, to an extent here even now.’

“Wendy-Smith *was sure*, and so am I. In 1913 two monsters were born in Dunwich to a degenerate half-wit of a woman. They are both dead now, but there are still whispers in Dunwich of the affair, and of the father who is hinted to have been other than human. Oh, there are many examples of survivals from olden times, of beings and forces which have reached godlike proportions in the minds of men, and who is to deny that at least some of them could be real?

“And where Ithaqua is concerned — why! — there are elementals of the air mentioned in every mythology known to man. Rightly so, for even today, and other than this Ithaqua of the Snows, there are strange winds that blow madness and horror into the minds of men. I mean winds like the *Foehn*, the south wind of Alpine valleys. And what of the piping winds of subterranean caverns, like that of the Calabrian Caves, which has been known to leave stout cavers white-haired, babbling wrecks? What do we understand of such forces?

“Our human race is a colony of ants, Mr. Lawton, inhabiting an anthill at the edge of a limitless chasm called infinity. All things may happen in infinity, and who knows what might come out of it? What do we know of *the facts* of anything, in our little corner of a never-ending universe, in this transient revolution in the space-time continuum? Seeping down from the stars at the beginning of time there were giants — beings who walked or flew across the spaces between the worlds, inhabiting and using entire systems at their will — and some of them still remain. What would the race of man be to creatures such as these? I’ll tell you — we are the plankton of the seas of space and time!

“But there, I’m going on a bit, away from the point. The facts are these: that before I came to Navissa with Sam, he had already been told that he was sterile, and that after I left — after that horror had killed my husband — well, then I was pregnant.

“Of course, at first I believed that the doctors were wrong, that Sam had not been sterile at all, and this seemed to be borne out when my baby was born just within eight months of Sam’s death. Obviously, in the normal scale of reckoning, Kirby was conceived before we came to Navissa. And yet it was a difficult pregnancy, and as a newborn baby he was a weedy, strange little thing — frail and dreamy and far too quiet — so that even without knowing much of children I nevertheless found myself thinking of his birth as having been . . . premature!

“His feet were large even for a boy, and his toes were webbed with a pink stretching of skin that thickened and lengthened as he grew. Understand, please, that my boy was in no way a freak — not visibly. Many people have this webbing between their toes; some have it between their fingers too. In all other respects he

seemed to be completely normal. Well, perhaps not completely. . . .

“Long before he could walk, he was talking — baby talk, you know — but not to me. Always it was when he was alone in his cot, and always when there was a wind. He could hear the wind, and he used to talk to it. But that was nothing really remarkable; grown children often talk to invisible playmates, people and creatures that only they can see; except that I used to listen to Kirby, and sometimes —

“Sometimes I could swear that the winds talked back to him!

“You may laugh if you wish, Mr. Lawton, and I don’t suppose I could blame you, but there always seemed to be a wind about our home, when everywhere else the air was still. . . .

“As Kirby grew older this didn’t seem to happen so frequently, or perhaps I simply grew used to it, I really don’t know. But when he should have been starting school, well, that was out of the question. He was such a dreamer, in no way slow or backward, you understand, but he constantly lived in a kind of dreamworld. And always — though he seemed later to have given up his strange conversations with drafts and breezes — he had this fascination with the wind.

“One summer night when he was seven, a wind came up that threatened to blow the very house down. It came from the sea, a north wind off the Gulf of Mexico — or perhaps it came from farther away than that, who can say? At any rate, I was frightened, as were most of the families in the area where we lived. Such was the fury of that demon wind, and it reminded me so of . . . of another wind I had known. Kirby sensed my fear. It was the strangest thing, but he threw open a window and he shouted. He

shouted right into the teeth of that howling, banshee storm. Can you imagine that? A small child, teeth bared and hair streaming, shouting at a wind that might have lifted him right off the face of the Earth!

“And yet in another minute the worst of the storm was over, leaving Kirby scolding and snapping at the smaller gusts of air that yet remained, until the night was as still as any other summer night. . . .

“At ten he became interested in model airplanes, and one of his private tutors helped him and encouraged him to design and build his own. You see, he was far ahead of other children his own age. One of his models created a lot of excitement when it was shown at an exhibition of flying models at a local club. It had a very strange shape; its underside was all rippled and warped. It worked on a gliding principle of my son's own invention, having no motor but relying upon what Kirby called his ‘rippled-air principle.’ I remember he took it to the gliding club that day, and that the other members — children and adults alike — laughed at his model and said it couldn't possibly fly. Kirby flew it for them for an hour, and they all marveled while it seemingly defied gravity in a fantastic series of flights. Then, because they had laughed at him, he smashed the model down to its balsa wood and tissue paper components to strew them like confetti at the feet of the spectators. That was his pride working, even as a child. I wasn't there myself, but I'm told that a designer from one of the big model companies cried when Kirby destroyed his glider. . . .

“He loved kites, too — he always had a kite. He would sit for hours and simply watch his kite standing on the air at the end of its string.

“When he was thirteen he wanted binoculars so that he could study the birds in flight. Hawks were of particular interest to him — the way they hover, motionless except for the rapid beating of their wings. They, too, seem almost to walk on the wind.

“Then came the day when a more serious and worrying aspect of Kirby’s fascination with the air and flight came to light. For a long time I had been worried about him, about his constant restlessness and moodiness and his ominous obsession.

“We were visiting Chichén Itzá, a trip I hoped would take Kirby’s mind off other things. In fact the trip had a twofold purpose; the other was that I had been to Chichén Itzá before with Sam, and this was my way of remembering how it had been. Every now and then I would visit a place where we had been happy before . . . before his death.

“There were, however, a number of things I had not taken into account. There is often a wind playing among those ancient ruins, and the ruins themselves — with their aura of antiquity, their strange glyphs, their history of bloody worship and nighted gods — can be . . . disturbing.

“I had forgotten, too, that the Mayas had their own god of the air, Quetzalcoátl, the plumed serpent, and I suspect that this was almost my undoing.

“Kirby had been quiet and moody during the outward trip, and he stayed that way even after freshening up and while we began to explore the ancient buildings and temples. It was while I was admiring other ruins that Kirby climbed the high, hideously adorned Temple of the Warriors, with its facade of plumed serpents, their mouths fanged and tails rampant.

“He was seen to fall — or jump — by at least two dozen peo-

ple, mainly Mexicans, but later they all told the same story: how the wind had seemed almost to buoy him up; how he had seemed to fall in slow motion; how he had uttered an eerie cry before stepping into space, like a call to strange gods for assistance. And after that terrible fall, onto ancient stone flags and from such a great height . . . ?

“It was a miracle, people said, that Kirby was unhurt.

“Well, eventually I was able to convince the authorities at the site that Kirby must have fallen, and I was able to get him away before he came out of his faint. Oh, yes, he had fainted. A fall like that, and the only result a swoon!

“But though I had explained away the incident as best I could, I don’t suppose I could ever have explained the look on Kirby’s face as I carried him away — that smile of triumph or strange satisfaction.

“Now all this happened not long after his fourteenth birthday, at a time when here in the north the five-year cycle of so-called ‘superstitious belief and mass hysteria’ was once more at its height, just as it is now. So far as I was concerned, there was an undeniable connection.

“Since then — and I blame myself that I’ve only recently discovered this — Kirby has been a secret saver, hoarding away whatever money he could lay his hands on towards some future purpose or ambition; and now of course I know that this was his journey north. All his life, you see, he had followed the trail of his destiny, and I don’t suppose that there was anything I could have done to change it.

“A short time ago something happened to clinch it, something that drew Kirby north like a magnet. Now — I don’t know what

the end will be, *but I must see it* — I must find out, one way or the other, once and for all. . . .”

V

By 1:30 P.M. we were once again mobile, our vehicle driving through occasional flurries of snow, fortunately with a light tail wind to boost us on our way. And it was not long before we came upon signs that warned of the presence of others there in that white waste, fresh snowshoe tracks that crossed our path at a tangent and moved in the direction of low hills. We followed these tracks — apparently belonging to a group of at least three persons — until they converged with others atop one of the low bald hills. Here I halted the snow-cat and dismounted, peering out at the wilderness around and discovering that from here, between flurries of snow, I could roughly make out the site of our last camp. It dawned on me at once that this would have been a wonderful vantage point from which to keep us under observation.

Then Mrs. Bridgeman tugged at the sleeve of my parka, pointing away to the north where finally I made out a group of black dots against the pure white background straggling toward a distant pine forest.

“We must follow them,” she declared. “They will be members of His order, on their way to the ceremonies. Kirby may even be with them!” At the thought her voice took on a feverish excitement.

“Quickly — we mustn’t lose them!”

But lose them we did.

By the time we reached that stretch of open ground where first

Mrs. Bridgeman had spied the unknown group, its members had already disappeared into the darkness of the trees some hundreds of yards away. At the edge of the forest I again brought our vehicle to a halt, and though we might easily have followed the tracks through the trees — which was my not-so-delicate companion's immediate and instinctive desire — that would have meant abandoning the snow-cat.

Instead, I argued that we should skirt the forest, find a vantage point on its northern fringe, and there await the emergence of whichever persons they were who chose to wander these wastes at the onset of winter. To this seemingly sound proposal Mrs. Bridgeman readily enough agreed, and within the hour we were hidden away in a cluster of pines beyond the forest proper. There we took turns to watch the fringe of the forest, and while I took first watch, Mrs. Bridgeman made a pot of coffee. We had only unpacked our stove, deeming it unwise to make ourselves too comfortable in case we should need to be on the move in a hurry.

After only twenty minutes at my post I would have been willing to swear that the sky had snowed itself out for the day. Indeed I made just such a comment to my pale companion when she brought me a cup of coffee. The leaden heavens had cleared — there was hardly a cloud in sight in the afternoon sky — and then, as if from nowhere, there came the wind!

Instantly the temperature dropped, and I felt the hairs in my nostrils stiffening and cracking with each sniff of icy air. The remaining half cup of coffee in my hand froze in a matter of seconds, and a rime of frost sprang up on my eyebrows. Heavily wrapped as I was, still I felt the cold striking through, and I drew back into the comparative shelter of the trees. In all my meteorological experience I have never known or heard of anything like it before.

The storm that came with the wind and the cold, rising up in the space of the next half hour, took me totally by surprise.

Looking up, through gaps in the snow-laden branches, I could plainly see the angry boiling up of clouds into a strange mixture of cumulonimbus and nimbostratus, where only moments before there had been no clouds at all! If the sky had seemed leaden earlier in the day, now it positively glowered. The atmosphere pressed down with an almost tangible weight upon our heads.

And finally it snowed.

Mercifully, and despite the fact that all the symptoms warned of a tremendous storm to come, the wind remained only moderate, but by comparison the snow came down as if it had never snowed before. The *hushh* of settling snow was quite audible as the huge flakes fell in gust-driven, spiraling myriads to the ground.

Plainly my watch on the forest was no longer necessary, indeed impossible, for such was the curtain of falling snow that visibility was down to no more than a few feet. We were stuck, but surely no more so than that suspicious band of wanderers in the forest — members of "His order," as Mrs. Bridgeman would have it. We would have to wait the weather out, and so would they.

For the next two hours, until about 5:00 P.M., I busied myself making a windbreak of fallen branches and packed snow until even the moderate wind was shut out of our hideaway. Then I built a small fire in the center of this sheltered area close to the snow-cat. Whatever happened, I did not want the works of that machine put out of order by freezing temperatures.

During all this time Mrs. Bridgeman simply sat and brooded, plainly unconcerned with the cold. She was frustrated, I imagined, by our inability to get on with the search. In the same

period, busy as I was with my hands, nevertheless I was able to ponder much of what had passed, drawing what half-formed conclusions I could in the circumstances.

The truth of the matter was that there did seem to be too many coincidences here for comfort, and personally I had already experienced a number of things previously unknown to me or alien to my nature. I could no longer keep from my mind memories of that strange dream of mine; similarly the odd sensations I had felt on contact with or in proximity to the yellow medallion of gold and obscure alloys.

Then there was the simple, quite definite fact — bolstered both by the judge and the widow Bridgeman alike, and by McCauley the Mountie — that a freakish five-year cycle of strange excitement, morbid worship, and curious cult activity *did* actually exist in these parts. And dwelling on thoughts such as these, I found myself wondering once again just what had happened here twenty years gone, that its echoes should so involve me here and now.

Patently it had not been — could not possibly have been — as Mrs. Bridgeman “remembered” it. And yet, apart from her previous nervousness and one or two forgivable lapses under emotional stress since then, she had seemed to me to be as normal as most women. . . .

Or had she?

I found myself in two minds. What of this fantastic immunity of hers to sub-zero temperatures? Even now she sat there, peering out into the falling snow, pale and distant and impervious still to the frost that rimed her forehead and dusted her clothes, perfectly comfortable despite the fact that she had once again shed her heavy parka. No, I was wrong, and it amazed me that I had fooled myself for so long. There was very little about this woman that

was normal. She had known — *something*. Some experience to set her both mentally and physically aside from mundane mankind.

But could that experience possibly have been the horror she “remembered?” Even then I could not quite bring myself to believe.

And yet . . . what of that shape we had stumbled across in the snow, that deep imprint as of a huge webbed foot? My mind flashed back to our first night out from Navissa, when I had dreamed of a colossal shape in the sky, a shape with carmine stars for eyes!

— But this was no good. Why! — here I was, nervous as a cat, starting at the slightest flurry of snow out there beyond the heavy branches. I laughed at my own fancies, albeit shakily, because just for a second as I had turned from the bright fire I had imagined that a shadow moved out in the snow, a furtive figure that shifted just beyond my periphery of vision.

“I saw you jump, Mr. Lawton,” my companion suddenly spoke up. “Did you see something?”

“I don’t think so,” I briskly answered, my voice louder than necessary. “Just a shadow in the snow.”

“He has been there for five minutes now. We are under observation!”

“What? You mean there’s someone out there?”

“Yes, one of His worshipers, I imagine, sent by the others to see what we’re up to. We’re outsiders, you know. But I don’t think they’ll try to do us any harm. Kirby would never allow that.”

She was right. Suddenly I saw him, limned darkly against the white background as the whirling snow flurried to one side.

Eskimo or Indian, I could not tell which, but I believe his face was impassive. He was merely — watching.

From that time on the storm strengthened, with the wind building up to a steady blast that drove the snow through the trees in an impenetrable icy wall. Behind my barrier of branches and snow we were comfortable enough, for I had extended the shelter until its wall lay open only in a narrow gap to the south; the wind was from the north. The snow on the outside of the shelter had long since formed a frozen crust, so that no wind came through, and the ice-stiffened branches of the surrounding trees gave protection from above. My fire blazed and roared in subdued imitation of the wind, for I had braved half a dozen brief excursions beyond the shelter to bring back armfuls of fallen branches. Their trimmed ends burning, Indian fashion, where they met like the spokes of a wheel to form the center of the fire, these branches now warmed our small enclosure and gave it light. They had burned thus all through the afternoon and into the night.

It was about 10:00 P.M., pitch-black beyond the wall of the shelter and still snowing hard, when we became aware of our second visitor; the first had silently left us some hours earlier. Mrs. Bridgeman saw him first, grabbing my elbow so that I started to my feet and turned toward the open end of our sanctuary. There, framed in the firelight, white with snow from head to foot, stood a man.

A white man, he came forward shaking the snow from his clothes. He paused before the fire and tipped back the hood of his fur jacket, then shed his gloves and held his hands out to the flames. His eyebrows were black, meeting across his nose. He was very tall. After a while, ignoring me, he turned to Mrs.

Bridgeman. He had a strong New England accent when he said, "It is Kirby's wish that you go back to Navissa. He does not want you to be hurt. He says you should return now to Navissa — both of you — and that you should then go home. He knows everything now. He knows why he is here, and he wants to stay. His destiny is the glory of the spaces between the worlds, the knowledge and mysteries of the Ancient Ones who were here before man, godship over the icy winds of Earth and space with his Lord and Master. You have had him for almost twenty years. Now he wants to be free."

I was on the point of questioning his authority and tone when Mrs. Bridgeman cut me short. "Free? What kind of freedom? To stay here in the ice; to wander the icy wastes until any attempt to return to the world of men would mean certain death? To learn the alien lore of monsters spawned in black pits beyond time and space?"

Her voice rose hysterically. "To know no woman's love but sate his lust with strangers, leaving them for dead and worse in a manner which *only his loathsome father could ever teach him?*"

The stranger lifted his hand in sudden anger. "You dare to speak of Him like —" I sprang between them, but it was immediately apparent that I was not needed.

The change in Mrs. Bridgeman was almost frightening. She had been near to hysterics only seconds ago; now her eyes blazed with anger in her white face, and she stood so straight and regal as to make our unknown visitor draw back, his raised arm falling quickly to his side.

"Do *I* dare?" Her voice was as chill as the wind. "I am Kirby's mother! Yes, I dare — but what *you* have dared. . . ! You would raise your hand to me?"

"I . . . it was only . . . I was angry." The man stumbled over his words before finding his former composure. "But all this makes no difference. Stay if you wish; you will not be able to enter the area of the ceremonies, for there will be a watch out. If you did get by the watch unseen — then the result would be upon your own heads. On the other hand, if you go back now, I can promise you fair weather all the way to Navissa. But only if you go now, at once."

My white-faced companion frowned and turned away to stare at the dying fire.

No doubt believing that she was weakening, the stranger offered his final inducement: "Think, Mrs. Bridgeman, and think well. There can only be one conclusion, one end, if you stay here — for you have looked upon Ithaqua!"

She turned back to him, desperate questions spilling from her lips. "Must we go tonight? May I not see my son just once? Will he be —?"

"He will not be harmed." She was cut off. "His destiny is — *great!* Yes, you must go tonight; he does not wish to see you, and there is so little —" he paused, almost visibly biting his tongue, but it seemed that Mrs. Bridgeman had not noticed his gaffe. Plainly he had been about to say "there is so little time."

My companion sighed and her shoulders slumped. "If I agree — we will need fair weather. That can be . . . arranged?"

The visitor eagerly nodded (though to me the idea that he might somehow contrive to control the weather seemed utterly ridiculous) and answered, "From now until midnight, the snow will lessen, the winds will die away. After that —" he shrugged. "But you will be well away from here before then."

She nodded, apparently in defeat. "Then we'll go. We need

only sufficient time to break camp. A few minutes. But —”

“No buts, Mrs. Bridgeman. There was a Mountie here. He did not want to go away either. Now —” again he shrugged, the movement of his shoulders speaking volumes.

“McCauley!” I gasped.

“That was not the Mountie’s name,” he answered me, “but whoever he was, he too was looking for this lady’s son.” He was obviously talking about some other Mountie from Fir Valley camp, and I remembered McCauley having mentioned another policeman who set out to search the wastes at the same time as he himself had headed for Stillwater.

“What have you done to him, to this man?” I asked.

He ignored me and, pulling on his gloves, again addressed Mrs. Bridgeman: “I will wait until you go.” He pulled the hood of his jacket over his head, then stepped back out into the snow.

The conversation, what little there had been, had completely astounded me. In fact my astonishment had grown apace with what I had heard. Quite apart from openly admitting to what could only be murder, our strange visitor had agreed with — indeed, if my ears had not deceived me, he had *confirmed* — the wildest possible nightmares, horrors which until now, so far as I was aware or concerned, had only manifested themselves in the works of Samuel Bridgeman and others who had worked the same vein before him, and in the disturbed imagination of his widow. Surely this must be the final, utmost proof positive of the effect of the morbid five-year cycle on the minds of men? Could it be anything else?

Finally I turned to the widow to ask, “Are we actually going back to Navissa, after all your efforts? And now, when we’re so close?”

First glancing cautiously out into the falling snow, she hurriedly shook her head, putting a warning finger to her lips. No, it was as I suspected; her almost docile concurrence, following that blazing, regal display of defiance, had merely been a ruse. She in no way intended to desert her son, whether he wished it or not. "Quickly — let's get packed up," she whispered. "He was right. The ceremony is tonight, it must be, and we haven't much time."

VI

From then on my mind was given little time to dwell on anything; I simply followed Mrs. Bridgeman's directions to the letter, questioning nothing. In any case it was obvious that her game must now be played to outwit the enemy (I had come to think of the strange worshipers as "the enemy"), not to defeat them physically or to talk them down. That was plainly out of the question. If indeed they had resorted to murder in order to do whatever they intended to do, they would surely not let a mere woman stop them now.

So it was that when we set off south aboard the snow-cat, in a direction roughly that of Navissa, I knew that it would not be long before we were doubling back on our tracks. And sure enough, within the half hour, at about 11:00 P.M., as we came over a low hill in the then very light snow, there Mrs. Bridgeman ordered a wide swing to the west.

We held this westward course for ten more minutes, then turned sharply to our right flank, bringing the snow-cat once again onto a northerly course. For a further twenty minutes we drove through the light snow, which, now that it had the slacken-

ing north wind behind it, stung a little on my face. Then, again at Mrs. Bridgeman's direction, we climbed a thinly wooded slope to fetch a halt at the top not twenty minutes distant from our starting point. At the speed we had traveled, and given that the enemy had no machine comparable to our snow-cat, we could not possibly have been followed; and here, sheltered by the thin trees and the still-lightly falling snow, we should be quite invisible to the enemy somewhere to our front.

Now, while we paused for a moment, I once more found questions forming in my mind for which I had no answers, and I had no sooner decided to voice them than my pale companion pointed suddenly out through the thin branches of the trees on the summit of the hill in the direction of a great black forested area some half mile to the north.

It was that same forest into which the enemy had vanished earlier in the day when we had been trailing them. Now at its four cardinal points, up sprang great fires of leaping red flame; and now too, coming to us on the wings of the north wind, faint and uneven we heard massed voices raised in a chilling ritual — the Rites of Ithaqua:

*"Iä! Iä! — Ithaqua! Ithaqua!
Ai! Ai! Ai! — Ithaqua!
Ce-fyak vulg-t'uhm —
Ithaqua fhtagn!
Ugh! — Iä! Iä! — Ai! Ai! Ai!"*

Again and again, repeatedly the wind carried that utterly alien chorus to our ears, and inside me it seemed suddenly that my blood froze. It was not only this abhorrent chanting with its gut-

tural tones, but also the *precision* of the — singing? — and the obvious familiarity of the voices with the song. This was no blind, parrotlike repetition of obscure vocal forms but a combination of a hundred or more perfectly synchronized voices whose soul-rending interpretation of a hideous alien liturgy had transformed it into this present awesome cacophony — a cacophony whose horror might indeed breach the voids between the worlds! Suddenly I knew that if there was an Ithaqua, then he must surely hear and answer the voices of his worshipers.

“Very little time now,” my companion muttered, more to herself than to me. “The place of the ceremony must be central in that forest — and that’s where Kirby is!”

I stared hard through the snow, which again was beginning to fall heavier, seeing that the nearest and most southerly of the four fires blazed some distance to the northeast of our position. The westerly fire was about a half a mile southwest of us.

“If we head directly between those two fires,” I said, “entering the woods and heading straight for the most northerly fire, on the far side, then we should come pretty close to the center of the forest. We can take the snow-cat to the edge of the trees, but from there we must go on foot. If we can grab Kirby and make a run for it — well, perhaps the cat can take three, at a push.”

“Yes,” she answered, “it’s worth a try. If the worse comes to the worst . . . then at least I’ll know what the end of it was. . . .”

With that I started up the cat’s motor again, thankful that the wind was in our favor and knowing that under cover of the continuous chanting we stood a fair chance of driving right to the edge of the forest without being heard.

As we headed out across the white expanse of snow to the forest’s edge, I could see in the heavens the glow of the fires

reflected from the base of towering, strangely roiling nimbostratus. I knew then, instinctively, that we were in for a storm to end all storms.

At the edge of the forest, undetected so far, we dismounted and left the snow-cat hidden in the lower branches of a great pine, making our way on foot through the forest's dark depths.

The going was of necessity very slow, and of course we dared show no light, but having progressed only a few hundred yards, we found that we could see in the distance the fires of individual torches, and the chanting came much louder and clearer. If there were guards, then we must have passed them by without attracting attention. The chanting was tinged now with a certain hysteria, a frenzy that built steadily toward a crescendo, charging the frosty air with unseen and menacing energies.

Abruptly, we came to the perimeter of a great cleared area where the trees had been cut down to be built into a huge platform in the center. All about this platform a mongrel congregation of fur and parka-clad men and women stood, their faces showing ruddy and wild-eyed in the light of numerous torches. There were Eskimos, Indians, Negroes, and whites—people from backgrounds as varied as their colors and races—over one hundred and fifty of them at a guess.

The time by then was rapidly approaching midnight, and the deafening, dreadful chanting had now reached such an intensity as to make any increase seem almost impossible. Nevertheless there *was* an increase, at which, with one final convulsive shriek, the entire crowd about the pyramidal platform prostrated themselves face-down in the snow — all but one!

“Kirby!” I heard Mrs. Bridgeman gasp, as that one upright man, proud and straight-backed, naked except for his trousers,

commenced a slow and measured climb up the log steps of the platform.

"*Kirby!*" She shouted his name this time, starting forward and avoiding the arms I held out to restrain her.

"*He comes! He comes!*" The cry went out in a hiss of rapture from one hundred and fifty throats — drowning Lucille Bridgeman's shout — and suddenly I felt the expectancy in the air.

The prostrate figures were silent now, waiting; the slight wind had disappeared; the snow no longer fell. Only Mrs. Bridgeman's running figure disturbed the stillness, that and the flickering of torches where they stood up from the snow; only her feet on the ice-crustrated surface broke the silence.

Kirby had reached the top of the pyramid, and his mother was running between the outermost of the encircling, prostrate figures when it happened. She stopped suddenly and cast a terrified glance at the night sky, then lifted a hand to her open mouth. I, too, looked up, craning my neck to see — and something moved high in the roiling clouds!

"*He comes! He comes!*" The vast sigh went up again.

Many things happened then, all in the space of a few seconds, comprising a total and a culmination beyond belief. And still I pray that what I heard and saw at that time, that everything I experienced, was an illusion engendered of too great a proximity to the mass lunacy of those who obey the call of the five-year cycle.

How best to describe it?

I remember running forward a few paces, into the clearing proper, before my eyes followed Mrs. Bridgeman's gaze to the boiling heavens where at first I saw nothing but the madly whirling clouds. I recall, however, a picture in my memory of the man

called Kirby standing wide-legged atop the great pyramid of logs, his arms and hands reaching in a gesture of expectancy or welcome up and outwards, his hair streaming in a wind which sprang up suddenly *from above* to blow slantingly down from the skies. And then there is the vision that burns even now in my mind's eye of a *darkness* that fell out of the clouds like a black meteorite, a darkness grotesquely shaped like a man with carmine stars for eyes in its bloated blot of a head, and my ears still ring to the pealing screams of mortal fear and loathing that went up in that same instant from the poor, paralyzed woman who now saw and recognized the horror from the skies.

The Beast-God came striding down the wind, descending more slowly now than at first but still speeding like some great bird of prey to earth, its fantastic splayfooted strides carrying it as if down some giant, winding, invisible staircase straight to the waiting figure atop the pyramid, until the huge black head turned and, from high above the trees, the thing called the Wind-Walker saw the hysterically screaming woman where she stood amid the prostrate forms of its worshipers — saw and *knew* her!

In midair the Being came to an abrupt, impossible halt — and then the great carmine eyes grew larger still, and the blackly outlined arms lifted to the skies in what was clearly an attitude of rage! One monstrous hand reached to the rushing clouds, and through them, to emerge but a split second later and hurl something huge and round to earth. Still Mrs. Bridgeman screamed — loud, clear, and horrifically — as the unerringly hurled thing smashed down upon her with a roar of tortured air, flattening her instantly to the frozen ground and splintering into a mad bomb burst of exploding shards of — ice!

The scene about the log pyramid at that hellish moment must have been chaos. I myself was thrown in the rush of pressured air back into the trees, but in the next moment when I looked out again upon the clearing, all I could see was . . . blood!

The ice-torn, mangled bodies of a wide segment of worshipers were still tumbling outward from the blasted area where Mrs. Bridgeman had stood — a number of bloodied bodies still fell, lazily almost, like red leaves through the howling air; logs were beginning to burst outwards from the base of the pyramid where flying chunks of ice had crashed with the force of grenades.

Nor was Ithaqua finished!

It seemed almost as if I could read this horror's thoughts as it towered raging in the sky: *Were these not His worshipers? — and had they not betrayed their faith in this matter, which was to have been His first meeting with His son on Earth? Well, they would pay for this error, for allowing this Daughter of Man, the mother of His son, to interfere with the ceremony!*

In the space of a few more seconds huge balls of ice were flung to earth like a scattering of hailstones — but with far more devastating effect. When the last of them had scattered its ice-knife shards far and wide about the clearing, the snow was red with spouting blood; the screams of the torn and dying rose even above the howling devil-wind that Ithaqua had brought with Him from the star-spaces. The trees bent outward now from the clearing with the fury of that fiendish storm, and logs snapped and popped like matchsticks from the base of the platform at the crimson clearing's center.

But a change had taken place in the attitude of the lone figure standing wild and wind-blown at the top of the tottering pyramid.

While the gigantic, anthropomorphic figure in the sky had raged and ravaged, raining down death and destruction in the form of ice-globes frozen in his hands and snatched down out of the heavens, so the man-God-child, now grown to strange adulthood, had watched from his vantage point above the clearing all that transpired. He had seen his mother ruthlessly crushed to a raw, red pulp; he had watched the demoniac destruction of many, perhaps all of those deluded followers of his monstrous father. Still, in a dazed bewilderment, he gazed down upon the awful aftermath in the clearing — and then he laid back his head and screamed in a composite agony of frustration, horror, despair, and rapidly waxing rage!

And in that monumental agony his hellish heritage told. For all the winds screamed with him, roaring, howling, shrieking in a circular chase about the platform that lifted logs and tossed them as twigs in a whirlpool round and about in an impossible spiraling whirl. Even the clouds above rushed and clashed the faster for Kirby's rage, until at last his Father knew the anger of His son for what it was — but did He understand?

Down through the sky the Wind-Walker came again, striding on great webbed feet through the currents of crazed air, arms reaching as a father reaches for his son —

— And at last, battered and bruised as I was and half unconscious from the wind's screaming and buffeting, I saw that which proved to me beyond all else that I had indeed succumbed to the five-year cycle of legend-inspired lunacy and mass hysteria.

For as the Ancient One descended, so His son rose up to meet Him — Kirby, racing up the wind in sure-footed bounds and leaps, roaring with a hurricane voice that tore the sky asunder and blasted the clouds back across the heavens in panic flight —

Kirby, expanding, exploding outward until his outline, limned against the frightened sky, became as great as that of his alien Sire — Kirby, Son of Ithaqua, whose clawing hands now reached in a raging blood-lust, whose snarling, bestial, darkening features demanded revenge!

For a moment, perhaps astounded, the Wind-Walker stood off — and there were two darkly towering figures in that tortured sky, two great heads in which twin pairs of carmine stars glared — and these figures rushed suddenly together in such a display of aerial fury that for a moment I could make out nothing of the battle but the flash of lightning and roar of thunder.

I shook my head and wiped the frost and frozen blood droplets from my forehead, and when next I dared look at the sky, I could see only the fleeing clouds madly racing away — the clouds and high, high above them, two dark dots that fought and tore and dwindled against a familiar but now leering background of stars and constellations. . . .

Almost twenty-four hours have passed. How I lived through the horrors of last night I shall never know; but I did, and physically unscathed, though I fear that my mind may be permanently damaged. If I attempt to rationalize the thing, then I can say that there was a storm of tremendous and devastating fury, during the course of which I lost my mind. I can say, too, that Mrs. Bridgeman is lost in the snow, even that she must now be dead despite her amazing invulnerability to the cold. But of the rest. . . ?

And on the other hand, if I forego all rationalizations and listen only to the little winds whispering among themselves behind my flimsy shelter. . . ? Can I deny my own senses?

I remember only snatches of what followed the terrible carnage and the onset of the aerial battle — my return to the snow-cat and how that machine broke down less than half an hour later in a blinding snowstorm; my frozen, stumbling fight against great white drifts with various items of equipment dragging me down; my bruising fall into a frozen hole in the snow whose *outlines* sent me in a renewed frenzy of gibbering terror across the wastes — until, exhausted, I collapsed here between these sheltering trees. I remember knowing that if I remained still where I had fallen, then I must die; and I recall the slow agony of setting up my shelter, packing the walls solid, and lighting the stove. There is nothing more, however, until I awakened around noon.

The cold roused me. The stove had long since burned itself out, but empty soup cans told me that somehow I had managed to feed myself before giving in to my absolute fatigue. I opened the reservoir of fuel in the stove's body and fired it again, once more attending to my hunger before drying out and warming my clothes item by item. Then, fortified and almost warm, heartened by a slight rise in the outside temperature, I set about the strengthening of this my last refuge; for I knew by then that this was as far as I could hope to go.

At about 4:00 P.M. the sky told me that soon it must storm again, and it was then that I thought to search out the snow-cat and fetch precious fuel for my stove. I almost lost myself when the snow began to fall again, but by 6:00 P.M. I was back in my shelter having recovered almost a gallon of fuel from the crippled cat. I had spent at least fifteen futile minutes trying to restart the vehicle, which still lies where I found it less than half a mile from my refuge. It was then, knowing that I could live only a few days

more at the outside, that I began to write this record. This is no mere foreboding, this grimly leering doom from which there can be no escape. I have given it some thought: I am too far from Navissa to stand even the slightest chance of making it on foot. I have food and fuel for three days at the most. Here . . . I can live for a few days more, and perhaps someone will find me. Outside, in some futile attempt to reach Navissa in the coming storm . . . I might last a day or even two, but I could never hope to cover all those miles in the snow.

It is about four in the morning. My wristwatch has stopped and I can no longer tell the time accurately. The storm, which I mistakenly thought had passed me by some miles to the north, has started outside. It was the roaring of the wind that roused me. I must have fallen asleep at my writing about midnight.

This is strange: the wind howls and roars, but through an opening in my canvas I can see the snow falling *steadily* against the black of the night, not hurried and hustled by the wind! And my shelter is too steady; it does not tremble in the gale. What does this mean?

I have discovered the truth. I am betrayed by the golden medallion which, when I discovered the howling thing still in my pocket, I hurled out into a drift. There it lies now, outside in the snow, shrieking and screaming with the eternal crying of the winds that roar between the worlds.

To leave my shelter now is certain death. And to stay. . . ?

I must be quick with this, for He has come! Called by the

demon howling of the medallion, He is here. No illusion this, no figment of my imagination but hideous fact. *He squats without, even now!*

I dare not look out into His great eyes; I do not know what I might see in those carmine depths. But I do know now how I will die. It will be quick.

All is silence now. The falling snow muffles all. The black thing waits outside like a huge hunched blot on the snow. The temperature falls, drops, plummets. I cannot get close enough to my stove. This is how I am to pass from the world of the living, in the icy tomb of my tent, for I have gazed upon Ithaqua!

It is the end . . . frost forms on my brow . . . my lips crack . . . my blood freezes . . . I cannot breathe the air . . . my fingers are as white as the snow . . . the cold. . . .

NAVISSA DAILY

The Snows Claim a Fresh Victim!

Just before the Christmas season, bad news has come out of Fir Valley camp where members of the Royal Canadian North-West Mounted Police have winter residence. During the recent lull in the weather, Constables McCauley and Sterling have been out in the wastes north of Navissa searching for traces of their former companion, Constable Jeffrey, who disappeared on routine investigations in October. The Mounties found no trace of Constable Jeffrey, but they did discover the body of Mr. David Lawton, an American

meteorologist, who also disappeared in the snow in October. Mr. Lawton, accompanied by a Mrs. Lucille Bridgeman, still missing, set out at that time in search of one Kirby Bridgeman, the woman's son. It was believed that this young man had gone into the wastes with a party of Eskimos and Indians, though no trace of this party has since been found. The recovery of Mr. Lawton's body will have to wait until the spring thaw; Constables McCauley and Sterling report that the body is frozen in a great block of clear ice which also incloses a canvas shelter and bivouac. The detailed report mentions that the eyes of the corpse are open and staring, as though the freezing took place with great rapidity. . . .

NELSON RECORDER A Christmas Horror!

Carol singers in the High Hill quarter of Nelson were astounded and horrified when, at 11:00 P.M., the frozen body of a young man crashed out of the upper branches of a tree in the grounds of No. 10 Church Street where they were caroling. Such was the force of its fall that the icy, naked figure brought down many branches with it. At least two of the witnesses state that the horribly mauled and mangled youth — whose uncommonly large and strangely webbed feet may help to identify him — fell not out of the tree but through it, as from the sky! Investigations are continuing.

Four thousand copies of this book have been printed and bound by The Lakeside Press, R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, from Compugraphic Garamond composed by Fox Valley Typesetting, Menasha, Wisconsin, on the Cameron book production system on 55 # Dontext. The binding cloth is Holliston Black Novelex.



BRIAN LUMLEY (1937—) was born in Horden, a colliery village in County Durham on the north-east coast of England, and serves as a sergeant in the British Royal Military Police. While stationed in West Germany in 1961, Lumley first encountered the writings of H. P. Lovecraft through the paperbound *Cry Horror!* collection, and correspondence with August Derleth several years later led to the initial publication of his work in *The Arkham Collector*, *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*, and *Dark Things*. His books for Arkham House include a short-story collection, *The Caller of the Black*, and a Lovecraftian novel, *Beneath the Moors*, though he has also written a trilogy of works involving the occult investigators Titus Crow and Henri-Laurent de Marigny. His forthcoming publications include a major new novel of supernatural horror based upon the Ithaqua legend, entitled *Spawn of the Wind*.

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